

Modern Phil menu versus good old Vienna

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The Cappella Istropolitana and Angelika Kirchschrager during the inauguration of Nuova Harmonia's season.

By Pablo Bardin
For the Herald

Nuova Harmonia kicks off season at refurbished Coliseo as Colón subscription series advances

The second concert of the subscription series of the Buenos Aires Philharmonic at the Colón gave us three contrasting views of the ways of organized sound before and after World War II. The following day was the inauguration of Nuova Harmonia's season at the refurbished Coliseo in a programme of Viennese music.

It was a pleasure to witness the debut of Chinese conductor Zhang Guoyong. A disciple of Gennadi Rozhdestvensky, he is at 51 the artistic director of the Shanghai Opera (he was born in that splendid city). The concert was short (just an hour) but it included two premières and a very tough symphony rarely done: a lot of music to study for the Phil's players.

You may remember that last year the Phil included some Chinese music and that I wasn't enthusiastic: China is enormously separated by their millenary culture from the West, and their own traditional orchestra has very little to do with our symphony orchestra. The adaptation of their pentatonic tunes to our culture felt artificial and the brilliant orchestration had little distinctive touches.

Yunkai Bao was born in 1946 and his succinct Chinese Suite (just 12 minutes) is certainly pleasant; the titles of the pieces are quite representative of the Chinese trend of extolling nature: Happy Sunrise; Going to West Gate; Song of Riddles; and Dialogue of Flowers. To my ears it sounded tonal, rather than pentatonic; the music veered between showy and sentimental. It was clear from the start that Zhang Guoyong dominates his profession thoroughly, and the Phil responded well.

Bernd Alois Zimmermann had a short life; born in 1918, he committed suicide in 1970. He is famous in Europe for his enormously complex opera Die Soldaten (The Soldiers) and this year we will have it on the Colón stage for the first time; quite a challenge, perhaps the première of the year. The brief concerto (rather a concertino, at 15 minutes long) for oboe and small orchestra is dated 1952. Although based on the 12-tone technique, the first movement pays homage to Stravinsky and later there are some Bartokian touches. Tough music but well wrought.

The solo part has virtuosic hurdles, negotiated with firmness by Néstor Garrote, the Phil's the principal oboe. The orchestral contribution sounded accurate under the clear gestures of the conductor.

Last year, the revival of Prokofiev's opera The Angel of Fire produced a deep impact in at least a section of the audience for its powerful depiction of hysteria and massive possession. Now we heard its perfect foil: his Third Symphony (1928) is based on material from the opera and has obsessive tension during most of it, though the second movement also offers some minutes of persuasive lyricism. Machinistic, dissonant, orchestrated with memorable punch, it may lack cohesion but it is music of strong personal seal.

Zhang Guoyong demonstrated here that he has the control and intelligence to make sense out of this seething musical tornado, and the Phil responded well, especially the first trumpet.

The Cappella Istropolitana is the Chamber Orchestra of Bratislava, capital of Slovakia, just an hour away from Vienna. Istropolitana means "city on the banks of the river" (the Danube). Born in 1983, the Cappella is an efficient organism; it has recorded 120 CDs and visited us once. Its concertino-conductor is Robert Marecek, a longtime member. Mezzosoprano Angelika Kirchschrager, a native of

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Salzburg, graduated at the Vienna Academy in 1984; she also visited us some years ago.

First Part, Franz Schubert: his youthful Third Symphony and four lieder in string ensemble arrangements. The composer's first six symphonies are fresh, personal and accomplished. The performance we witnessed was charming and accurate, 29 players responding easily to Marecek's intermittent gestures (he also played).

The lieder were a wrong decision from both conductor and singer. They sound wonderful in their original form with piano; the arrangements were mediocre and uncredited. Two of the songs are for men: Der Lindenbaum (The Linden Tree) from Winterreise; and the dramatic Erbkönig (King of the Alders). Im Frühling (In Spring) and of course the Ave Maria, were well chosen (by the way, the Ave Maria is Ellen's third song from Scott's The Lady of the Lake translated into German, not a sacred song!).

This singer has serious limitations: although her high range is good, she loses colour and volume as the voice goes to lower regions; and as an interpreter she is in this repertoire rather nondescript.

The second part showed her in much more congenial circumstances: not only she understands operetta but her voice was well suited to the pieces and she also has a humorous acting gift, as demonstrated in the Schwips-Lied (Drunken Song) from Johann Strauss II's A Night in Venice". She was also good in two Robert Stolz songs, one from his operetta Der Favorit, and the other typically Viennese, On the Prater the Trees are Flourishing Again, and in Heuberger's delicious Ins Chambre séparée (from The Opera Ball). The Orlofsky aria from Johann Strauss II's The Bat was no more than correct, but Siczynski's plangent song Vienna, Vienna, Only You was mellifluous. The encore was an acceptable Vilja Song from Lehár's The Merry Widow.

Apart from accompanying her very well, the Cappella gave us fine interpretations of two Johann Strauss II's standards: the Overture to The Bat and the lovely waltz Viennese Blood; the players really have the ideal give-and-take.

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