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Van Zweden, New York Philharmonic strike sparks in new concerto, familiar Tchaikovsky

November 22, 2016

By Eric C. Simpson

Jaap van Zweden conducted the New York Philharmonic Thursday night at David Geffen Hall. Photo: Chris Lee

Following a widely covered but closely guarded maestro search, the New York Philharmonic announced in January, that Jaap van Zweden will be the next music director of the New York Philharmonic. His tenure will not officially begin until 2018, but he paid a visit on Thursday night as music director-elect, his first chance to lead the orchestra since his appointment.

Thursday night's program seemed almost explicitly designed to showcase the new leader's versatility. It began with the overture to Act I of *Lohengrin*, certainly a test of a conductor's attention to detail and ability to vary an orchestra's color. The orchestra got about as close to the gossamer essence of the opening as is possible in the harsh light of David Geffen Hall. The triumphant entrance of the brass helped wake things up, but the auditorium's hard acoustic unfortunately compromised the whispery glow of much of the music, leaving it feeling cold.

One of the major questions about the van Zweden era has been whether he will continue the commitment to new music that was such a large part of the New York Philharmonic's identity under Alan Gilbert. Thursday was a good start, as the Philharmonic presented the New York premiere (world premiere, in its revised form) of *Unearth, Release*, a viola concerto by American composer Julia Adolphe, featuring the orchestra's own principal violist, Cynthia Phelps.



Cynthia Phelps performed Julia Adolphe's "Unearth, Release" Thursday night. Photo: Chris Lee

Adolphe has an expressive voice that combines strong melodic writing with atmospheric orchestration. The first movement, "Captive Voices," begins with buzzing, gurgling disquiet, opening up into a glossy sheen over which the solo viola follows its determined, often ferocious line. Occasionally the strings rose to a scream, but much of the variation in the music was accomplished through imaginative use of percussion, creating colored effects rather than just accent. As for the viola part itself, with the exception of the harmonics in this movement's closing bars, Adolphe stays away from extended technique entirely, using the viola's natural voice as her primary medium.

"Surface Tension" is made up largely of little, skittering dialogues between soloist and orchestra. Firm and clear, the orchestra showed a range of metallic colors. The solo part scurries its way along with bursts of tarantella-like motion, and Phelps attacked with virtuosic flair. The last movement, "Embracing Mist," is the most wandering of the three, a foggy, ethereal conclusion. The concerto in total is only nineteen minutes long, but it is a complex, evocative work, and marks an important success for its 28-year-old composer.

If there's anything we can read into the van Zweden appointment at this early stage, it likely means a refocusing on the standard Romantic repertoire, which has never been Gilbert's strong suit. Thursday's closing item was already a promising indicator in that direction—an intelligent but emotional, sonically rich performance of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony.



The symphony began with imposing force—blaring, dreadful, and dissolving into the weary pathos of the main theme. This was a beautifully layered, folded reading, a whole composed of masterfully executed details—from the sly ease in the woodwind glissandi, to lush swells of strings, to thrilling peaks. Van Zweden showed real freedom in his conducting, moving the tempo around with great effect, but never superfluously. Achieving this kind of nuance is no mean feat in a piece so violent in its extremes.

The oboe solo setting out the melody of the second movement was absolutely enchanting, a straightforward, almost matter-of-fact rendition that reflected soberly before being answered with weeping sorrow by the cellos. As the movement wore on, each iteration of the theme seemed more haunting than the last. The Scherzo was played with pulsing excitement, and even seemed to be exploring an actual range of color, just about impossible when the music consists entirely of pizzicati.

Even the incongruous, ostentatiously boisterous finale was unusually inspired—a big, blating celebration, taken at a racing tempo. It's hard to take this movement too seriously, so intent is it on aggressive jubilation. The best approach is the one that van Zweden pursued with brio—to go full-bore, banging and blaring away as loudly as possible. Bringing the combined forces of the orchestra nearly to an ear-bursting level, he made no apologies for ending the piece with a spectacular romp.

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