

MUSIC

New York Philharmonic's Next Leader Gives a Taste of Things to Come

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI NOV. 18, 2016

Great anticipation hovered over Thursday evening's New York Philharmonic concert at David Geffen Hall. It was the first program to be led by the Dutch conductor Jaap van Zweden since the announcement in January that he would succeed Alan Gilbert as music director.

As the music director of the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, and in earlier appearances with the Philharmonic, Mr. van Zweden, 55, has developed a reputation for giving exacting and feisty performances. Not surprisingly, those qualities bristled throughout the brawny, intense account he led of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony. At times, especially during his hard-driving reading of the finale, Mr. van Zweden pushed the symphony to unpleasant extremes of tempo and sound. Yet it was certainly exciting.

He has never been known as a new-music champion. But an encouraging sign of how he might approach his directorship, which begins in the 2018-19 season, came before intermission, when he conducted the New York premiere of Julia Adolphe's "Unearth, Release," a viola concerto commissioned by the Philharmonic and the League of American Orchestras. The soloist was Cynthia Phelps, the Philharmonic's impressive principal violist, who played the world premiere of the concerto this summer in North Carolina. (The score performed on Thursday is a revised version.)

Two years ago, as part of the first NY Phil Biennial of new music, Mr. Gilbert conducted the premiere of Ms. Adolphe's "Dark Sand, Sifting Light," a short, mercurial and alluring piece. A New York native, Ms. Adolphe, 28, takes an unconventional approach to the concerto genre in "Unearth, Release." As she writes in a composer's note, the relationship between the viola and the orchestra "transforms" over this 19-minute work's three movements.

In the first section, "Captive Voices," the orchestra plays a subdued mass of hazy harmonies and fidgety lines. Pitches fuse into pungent cluster chords. The ambiguous overall mood is at once inviting and ominous.

The viola keeps escaping from this orchestral stew, but not by fighting it. Instead, the viola simply emerges, with emphatic motifs alternating with flutters of notes. In reaction, the orchestra does not exactly roll over; rather, it seems to grow intrigued by the soloist.

The second movement, "Surface Tension," is more overtly combative, though often in a playful way. The viola and orchestra trade bursts of perpetual-motion riffs and phrases, in music percolating with sputtering rhythms and skittish lines. In a bold choice, Ms. Adolphe ends the concerto with a slow, pensive final movement, "Embracing Mist." During long, dreamy stretches, the viola floats mystical lines above the tremulous, shimmering orchestra.

Ms. Phelps conveyed the emotional nuances and mood shifts of the music in a commanding and plush-toned performance. Mr. van Zweden drew sensitive, confident and colorful playing from the Philharmonic.

The program opened with a radiant account of Wagner's Prelude to Act I of "Lohengrin." After intermission, Mr. van Zweden turned to the Tchaikovsky Fourth, and from the start, he seemed determined to bring virile energy to this staple. The Andante introduction to the first movement, in which the ominous theme of fate is pronounced in brassy flourishes, was incisive and ferocious — rigidly so. Mr. van Zweden was more impressive during the main section of the movement, when he drew out the shifting strands of the music with striking clarity

and a clear sense of direction.

He balanced poignancy and gravity in his rich-textured account of the slow movement. The playing Mr. van Zweden drew from the orchestra during the Scherzo, especially the pizzicato strings, was so crisp and precise that it lent an interesting element of tension to seemingly cheerful music.

He lost me, though, in his overaggressive account of the finale. Tchaikovsky described this movement as a “picture of festive merriment of the people.” This performance was more frenzied than festive.

In a ceremony onstage before the concert began, Matthew VanBesien, the Philharmonic’s president, presented the orchestra’s generous Marie-Josée Kravis Prize for New Music to the Dutch composer Louis Andriessen. In his acceptance speech, Mr. Andriessen promised to write a “beautiful piece” for Mr. van Zweden’s first season as music director. That’s definitely something to look forward to.

The New York Philharmonic repeats this program on Saturday at David Geffen Hall, 212-875-5656, nyphil.org.

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