

Zürcher Unterländer January 21, 2016

The Orchestra from the other Music Continent

Picture

Tabla Set, Zakir Husain and the Conductor Zane Dalal in the Tonhalle (from left)

ZÜRICH India is still almost immune to western classical music, but at the concert series “Migros Classics”, the orchestra from Mumbai celebrated global understanding at an international level.

Smetana’s overture to “The Bartered Bride” and Bartok’s “Concerto for Orchestra” are veritable examination pieces to test orchestral virtuosity. It begins with the vivacissimo fugue in the violins of the Smetana, and carries on throughout all the orchestra sections in the Bartok. The wind instruments are presented one after the other in the second movement (“Presentando le coppie”). It alternates between expressive melodies (“Elegia”) and laughter (“Intermezzo”), subtle colours, and solemn brass, as well as fine technical prowess in the strings in the presto finale: Nothing is left out in this piece, and the large Orchestra of India left nothing out.

The orchestra, which was founded in Mumbai in 2006, is regarded as the only professional orchestra on the sub-continent at an international level. The orchestra is currently on tour in Switzerland (Geneva, Zurich, St. Gallen), and on Tuesday it demonstrated its level impressively in the Tonhalle with the understated and masterful conductor Zane Dalal - and in such a manner that by no means made you think of its Asian heritage. The orchestra members hail from all over the world, and optically, the origin of the orchestra was also only discreetly visible.

Zubin Mehta, the famous conductor of Indian origin, estimated in an interview with the newspaper “Die Zeit” a few years back, that there are some 10,000 lovers of western classical music in Mumbai - that is, out of a population of 18 million - a population that is deeply rooted in its own tradition, and appears to be immune to the “world language” of western classical music.

Europe’s Yearning

India is the continent with the most vivacious distinct “classical” music tradition. Western music did establish itself during the many years of colonial rule, but it remained in the periphery, and fell more or less dormant after independence. As a contrast, western civilization time and time again - to a lesser or greater degree - yearns for primal experiences, and whenever a romantic movement has been the order of the day, India has always had a special appeal.

This was the case during the period of philosophical and literary romanticism around 1800, during the period of neo-romanticism and exoticism around 1900, and during the hippie romanticism in the 1960s. Raga Rock was conceived and “World Music” was born.

In the mid-sixties, Beatles guitarist George Harrison travelled to India to see the famous sitar

player Ravi Shankar (1920-2012), who for his part made his career in the west, and collaborated with greats of rock, jazz, and classical music. But he also found a western audience for his classical raga music, and even made an appearance in 1969 at the legendary Woodstock Festival. Shankar often played with the younger tabla star, Zakir Hussain, who - like Shankar - was a celebrated inheritor of his country's great musical traditions, and also open for encounters with western music. He has collaborated intensively with the jazz and rock guitarist John McLaughlin.

Zakir Hussain had come to the Tonhalle to perform on his two drums, electronically amplified in the big hall, as a soloist in his own Concerto for Tabla and Orchestra. The name of the piece, "Peshkar," describes a cyclical compositional form. For an audience that was not privy to the musical structure, what was more important was Hussain's extremely nuanced rhythmical panache, and in addition the downright hypnotic presence of the sound from the smaller drum, and the astonishing sound variation from the larger.

Impressive

While there was a clear and evident connection between the virtuosity of the soloist, the strong presence of one of the major instruments of the North Indian classical music tradition, and the East, the somewhat simply structured orchestra part sounded more or less western. At the beginning of the piece, the glissandi in the violin solo foreboded exoticism, but the lyrical passages to come (flute!) were not meant to be endowed with such far eastern charm. However, the piece, which was approximately 25 minutes long, lived on strong contrasts, and Zakir Hussain created a balanced, varied, and - in the transitions - impressive interplay with the orchestra, for which the audience thanked him.

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