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NOW PLAYING

March 20, 2011

A Castle's Locked Doors Bring Out a Wife's High C

By ZACHARY WOOLFE

Since he stepped down as music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 2009, Esa-Pekka Salonen has largely devoted himself to composing and, luckily for us, freelance conducting. Last season he led a burning new production of Janacek's "From the House of the Dead" at the Metropolitan Opera, and he has now organized the New York Philharmonic's three-week Hungarian Echoes festival, juxtaposing works by Haydn, Bartok and Ligeti.

One of the pleasures of following an orchestra closely is witnessing the ways in which guest conductors subtly (and not) shift the ensemble's style. Under Mr. Salonen the Philharmonic's sound is still lean and penetrating, but he has inspired a noticeably greater intensity and commitment. He brings tension to music, a sense of pacing and phrasing and stakes. When he conducts, you pay attention.

The centerpiece of Friday's program at Avery Fisher Hall was a taut, darkly radiant performance of Bartok's one-act opera "Duke Bluebeard's Castle." The work is a moody, stylized fairy tale about the duke and his new wife, Judith, who after gradually opening seven locked doors in her husband's castle finally reveals the three former wives he has murdered. As the opera ends, she takes her place among them. Are the wives real? Symbols of Bluebeard's past? Of the violence inherent in every romantic relationship? In true fin-de-siècle spirit it is all kept strictly ambiguous.

Rising to a new fever pitch every few minutes the opera, composed in 1911 when Bartok was 30, is a youthfully overheated amalgam of the lush chromaticism of Strauss's "Salome" and the enigmatic libretto of Debussy's "Pelléas et Mélisande." But it offers brilliant music, and Bartok created vivid set pieces to accompany the opening of the seven doors.

For sheer power few moments in music can compete with the C major blasts at the opening of the fifth door, behind which lies Bluebeard's expansive kingdom. As the Avery Fisher house lights were suddenly thrown on, the Philharmonic's brass section shone, and the excellent mezzo-soprano Michelle DeYoung, as Judith, unleashed a thrilling high C.

Mr. Salonen managed the crucial challenge of the piece, which is to fold these big moments into an organic whole. The opera can seem a series of seven showstoppers with bland connecting music, but on Friday the Philharmonic rose and fell in long, riveting phrases as Ms. DeYoung and the bass Gabor Bretz, as Bluebeard, sang with passionate responsiveness to the text.

The concert opened with a ferociously precise account of Ligeti's "Romanian Concerto," composed in 1951 but banned because of its hints of dissonance and first performed 20 years later. With its syncopated folk melodies pushing against the regularity of the orchestra's beat, the concerto echoes the tensions between the dancing melodies and the restraints of Classical form in the work that followed it on the program, Haydn's Symphony No. 7 in C ("Le Midi," or "Noon").

The performance of this glowing masterpiece had the flexibility of chamber music, particularly in the slow second movement's graceful interplay between the violinist Glenn Dicterow and the cellist Carter Brey. Even moments of spotty ensemble didn't really detract from a consistently involving intensity that has all too often been lacking at the Philharmonic lately.

This program will be repeated on Tuesday evening at Avery Fisher Hall, Lincoln Center; (212) 875-5656, nyphil.org.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: March 22, 2011

Schedule information on Monday with a music review of Esa-Pekka Salonen's conducting of the New York Philharmonic at Avery Fisher Hall on Friday misstated the telephone number for details about a repeat performance today. It is (212) 875-5656.