A concert worthy of its music

by Jay Nordlinger

Sunday afternoon at David Geffen Hall saw a great concert. Great.

Playing was the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, led by Manfred Honeck, its music director. There was also a soloist: the pianist Till Fellner, Honeck’s fellow Austrian, possibly the most famous Till since Eulenspiegel.

The concert began with Beethoven’s Piano Concerto No. 5, the “Emperor.” The work begins with an orchestral chord, which Honeck cut off with sweep and dash. Such a detail is not unimportant. Throughout the first movement—and throughout the concerto, really—the orchestra was both streamlined and substantial. Sound was neither heavy nor light. Honeck and the PSO achieved an excellent weight.

Fellner, at the keyboard, matched the orchestra (or did the orchestra match him?). He was smooth, clear, and aristocratic. He was both neat and feeling. And he was pianistic.

Now, why would I say that? This is a piano concerto, after all. What else is he supposed to be? Well, often pianists try to make the “Emperor” unreasonably big. They try to make their instrument more than a piano. They try to make it a second orchestra or something. And this ends in tears.

As the orchestra began the second movement, that slow B-major beauty, it was warm and spacious. When I say “spacious,” I suppose I am referring to tempo. Fellner, for his part, sang out clearly and plainly. “Plainly”? I mean, there was no fuss involved. He just sang. There were a few flubs in the orchestra along the way, but these were inconsequential.

The third movement, the Rondo, was leisurely, unforced—laidback. I could have used a little more vigor, but I could see the musicians’ point. I think a lot of us want this Rondo to be bigger than it is because it turned out to be the last piano-concerto music Beethoven ever wrote.
Pianists frequently make the error of trying to make Mozart’s last piano concerto, the one in B flat, K. 595, more profound or more meaningful than it is. Look, guys, he didn’t plan for it to be his last. It was just his latest bit of work. (And it is great, to be sure.)

Recently, I have been writing about encores. Some performers play them at the drop of a hat, without really being asked. I saw this the other week. The applause had pretty much died out, but the performer was bound and determined to play the encore he had planned, so, in a panic, he raced back out onto the stage. It was comical, I’m afraid, and I felt sorry for the fellow.

After the “Emperor,” Till Fellner was called back again and again. The audience was on its feet. Yet he played no encore—which was right, and classy.

Why right? Well, because an encore post-“Emperor” is really unnecessary, plus this was an inordinately long concert as it was. Why classy? Fellner had nothing left to prove. He did not need to show off. And he was content for Beethoven’s last concerto to have the last word.

After intermission, the PSO played a single, mighty work: Mahler’s Symphony No. 5 in C-sharp minor. Honeck truly knows Mahler, truly gets him. Is that because he grew up in outback Austria, where Mahler wrote? I don’t think so: I think Manfred Honeck is simply a good musician.

The opening movement of the Fifth was both correct and emotional. Heart was on sleeve, in Mahlerian fashion—but the sleeve was neat, so to speak. Tempos were just. Dances were natural. There were many subtleties, but there was no timidity.

If the trumpet part can be played better than by the PSO’s principal, Micah Wilkinson, I would like to hear it.

As Honeck conducted the second movement, I thought of a funny phrase: “precise hurly-burly.” That’s what Honeck and the PSO produced. The music was panoramic, titanic, mountainous. If I had a complaint about this movement—more like a minor criticism—it would be this: to my taste, the Jewish parts could have been more Jewish yet.

The third movement was both rustic and polished. (In other words, it was Mahlerian.) There are many tricky—very tricky—rhythms in this music, which for Honeck were more like a standard 4/4. Unless my eyes deceived me, he had his principal horn stand for a while. That was William Caballero, who delivered (in the noble tradition of caballeros).

After the third movement, the Scherzo, comes the Adagietto—probably the most beloved movement in all of Mahler. It was beautifully breathed, unfussy, and transcendent. The drive to the climax at the end was wondrous. Honeck was not too ethereal to be without heart.

And Mr. Caballero nailed the transition to the last movement, that high A.

At this point, I was ready to declare this performance one of the greatest Mahler experiences of my
life. And it was. Yet the last movement, the Rondo-Finale, was not at the level of the preceding four. It was somewhat workaday, without the assurance and freedom of the preceding movements.

In any event, Manfred Honeck is one of the great conductors in the world today, and the Pittsburgh Symphony under him is one of the great orchestras. The PSO has these stretches: in the late ’90s and early ’00s, when Mariss Jansons was standing before them, they were one of the great orchestras.

And the Mahler Fifth is one of the great symphonies. It is normally not ranked among the composer’s very best. But, oh, is there a case for it. I’ll tell you something macabre, which you may already know: Leonard Bernstein lies buried with a score of the Fifth laid across his heart. I believe I understand, and I understand all the better after Sunday afternoon’s concert.

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His podcast with The New Criterion, titled “Music for a While,” can be found here.