

Young Euro Classic: International music festival in shadow of European Union crisis

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The Young Euro Classic music festival, which took place from August 17 to September 3, was held in Berlin for the seventeenth time and attracted an audience of 26,000 to the concert hall at the Gendarmenmarkt. During the 18 days of the festival there were 24 events with 1,500 musicians from 25 different countries.

The central theme of the festival, to take a stance in support of a unified and peaceful Europe, collided with the current hard realities. The Young Euro Classic this year took place in the shadow of the crisis of the European Union (EU) and growing national and military tensions.

The opening concert, August 17, by the European Union Youth Orchestra (EUYO), conducted by Vasily Petrenko, is a case in point. In May, the EU cut off funding for this prestigious orchestra, which is celebrating its fortieth year in 2016.

The announcement produced a storm of protest. The orchestra and various conductors and organisations, including Simon Rattle and the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, expressed their indignation, and music students demonstrated in front of EU offices with their instruments. In June, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker reversed the decision and promised to come up with a solution for next year as well.

The EUYO's programme this year, which included Mozart's Piano Concerto for Two Pianos in E-flat Major K. 365 (316a) (1779) and Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 1 in D Major (1885-88), seemed to respond to this political crisis. Mozart's piece, which he composed to perform with his sister Nannerl, suggests the Enlightenment, a time of revolution and the beginning of a rich collaborative musical culture in bourgeois Europe. The Mahler symphony of 1885 was composed on the eve of the 20th century with its threats of war, crises and the decline of bourgeois culture.

It is a shame that the two soloists, Katia and Marielle Labèque, played Mozart's lively piano dialogue in such a detached way with subdued orchestral accompaniment. The musicians were much more engaged in their performance of the Mahler symphony, with its dramatic shifts between "soaringly cheerful" and "deathly mournful," its fascination with the secrets of nature and waltzing Vienna decadence, its rejoicing chords and apocalyptic strains.

An emphasis of the Young Euro Classic Festival was, once again, Eastern Europe, including the Baltic states and Russia. The Orchestra of the J?zeps V?tols Latvian Academy of Music, with the Osokins brothers, gave brilliant and rousing renditions of Sergei Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2 in C-Minor Op. 18 (1901) and No. 3 in D-Minor Op. 30 (1909).

On September 1, the young Estonian composer Liisa Hirsch received the European Composer Award for her composition "Mechanics of Flying," which the jury called a "picture of perpetual motion, of a sound that does not want to end."

The Bulgarian "Pioneer Youth Philharmonic," which performed for the first time, played Antonin Dvořák's Symphony No. 9 in E-Minor Op. 95 "From the New World" (1893), as well as works from the 1920s by Bulgarian composers Pantscho Vladigerov and Petko Staynov, who are not well-known in Germany. Staynov's "Thracian Dance" (1925-26) was a genuine surprise and provoked considerable applause.

The Symphony Orchestra of the National University of the Arts of Kazakhstan presented the efforts of modern Kazakh composers, including pieces by Alkuat Kasakbaev that involved the kobyz, a traditional string instrument that resembles a lute. Unfortunately, national-romantic nostalgia dominated in this post-Soviet music.

Performances by the Symphony Orchestra of the Ural Mussorgsky Conservatory, which performed for the first time and was conducted by Anton Shaburov, proved very popular. The orchestra played with enormous precision and musicality and brought the great Russian musical tradition to life once again. The student orchestra, which traveled 3,500 kilometers by bus from Yekaterinburg to Berlin, presented an entirely Russian program with works by Modest Mussorgsky, Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov, Yuri Abdokov (first performance) and Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6 in B-Minor Op. 74 "Pathétique" (1893).

The young Russian musicians movingly interpreted the last movement of the "Pathétique," the deeply sad and dramatic *Adagio lamentoso*, which so shook the audience at the very first performance of this symphony in St. Petersburg in 1893. Tchaikovsky died a week later.

Standing ovations for Arab musicians

Emphasis on the Russian musical tradition

The most politically charged performance at the event was the performance by the Arab Youth Philharmonic Orchestra. The orchestra, founded by Egyptian music professor Fawzy El-Shamy, assembled for the first time in 2006 in the Syrian capital of Damascus, where it prepared its first concert under the direction of German conductor Walter Mik.

At that time, Damascus was a cultural center. Today, war and destruction are raging, schools and cultural institutions are closed, and concerts have become impossible. Millions have fled Syria and hundreds of thousands have lost their lives.

The Arab ensemble performed for the first time three years ago at the Young Euro Classic music festival. At that time, the orchestra was made up of a hundred musicians. In the face of great difficulties and due to the personal efforts of the conductor, Heiner Buhlmann, 65 musicians, including many young women, came together this year from eight different Arab countries—Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Syria, Iraq and the Palestinian territories.

One musician who fled to Germany a year ago reported to the *Deutsche Welle* [Germany's international public broadcaster] how university education in Syria has collapsed and many music professors have left the country.

It has become impossible to rehearse together in Syria or in neighbouring countries. Consequently, the orchestra rehearsed for one week in a high school in Berlin. It is no wonder, therefore, that Johannes Brahms' Symphony No. 2 in D-Major Op. 73 (1877) did not sound perfect. This is true as well for the compositions of the two contemporary Arab composers (Amir Khalaf and Ali Osman), where the cues and rhythm were not always correct.

However, the orchestra's sensitive and professional accompaniment of arias from Georges Bizet's *Carmen* and Camille Saint-Saens' *Samson and Delilah*, sung by the vivacious Egyptian mezzo soprano Gala El Hadidi, who is an ensemble member at the Semperoper opera house in Dresden, showed the potential of the orchestra—if there were no war.

Unlike last year's Young Euro Classic music festival, there was no personal appearance by Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier this year. While the young Arab musicians were rehearsing in Grunewald, German "tornado" combat aircraft were flying over Syria.

Hosting the Arab concert instead was Constantin Schreiber, who uttered a few platitudes about the thousand-year relationship between East and West. Schreiber is an Arabic-speaking German television journalist, who teaches "German values" to refugees on the television program "Marhaba—Arrival in Germany." He previously worked for the foreign office and wrote the books *Germany Sold Out: How Foreign Investors are Taking Over Our Country* and *1000 Lashes*. In April, he appeared on the talk show "Hard but Fair" and claimed that terrorism was a part of Islam.

The audience's reaction stood in contrast to Schreiber's remarks and presence. Many audience members clearly saw the Arab youth concert as an opportunity to take a stand against war and to express solidarity with the young Arab musicians. Their performance was met with a long, standing ovation, which was repeated after a traditional Arabic song was performed as an encore. The musicians were visibly moved.

Festival ends in a minor key

In her summing up of the festival on its last night, director Gabriele Minz expressed an almost melancholy regret that this year's Young Euro Classic was over. She referred to the financial and political difficulties and, in an emotional appeal to the public, advocated pulling "together for the future" of the festival. "Particularly in these chaotic times, when stifling nationalism is on the rise once again," Minz said, it is important to take a stand for a "peaceful path to the unification of Europe."

It was a festival that ended in a minor key, also musically speaking. According to the commentary in the program notes, the concert of the French Youth Orchestra, directed by David Zinman, underscored "the colours of the late Romantic era: mysterious, melancholy, nervous."

After Claude Debussy's *Marche écossaise* (Scottish March, 1891/1908), the orchestra performed the cello concerto of Henri Dutilleux, called "*Tout un monde lointain ...*" ("An entire world ... far away"), which was first played in 1970. The cellist Gautier Capuçon performed it brilliantly with tender strokes of the bow. Based on Charles Baudelaire's poem cycle, *Les fleurs du mal* (The Flowers of Evil), first published in 1857, the composition is full of harmonic breaks and dissonance. It is mysterious and occasionally mystical and gloomy, as though Dutilleux (1916-2013) wanted to paint the turmoil and tragedy of the twentieth century in all available tonal colors.

Rachmaninoff's Symphony No. 3 in A minor (1935-36), with which the concert ended, is full of sadness and melancholy. The theme of the Latin requiem "Dies Irae" is quoted in the last movement. However, the composer does not end on a dark note, but with vital and major chords, as if he wanted to defy the gloomy times that pursued him in his Swiss exile.

Some of the performances of the Young Euro Classic music festival from August 28 to September 3 were recorded live and are available at <http://concert.arte.tv/de> for 30 days after performance.



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