

Young Euro Classic 2018—a display of boundless musical virtuosity and symphonic poetry

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A record audience of over 25,000 took part in this year's Young Euro Classic festival in Berlin. The festival took place for the 19th time, and ended on August 20 with a rousing tribute to American composer, musician and conductor Leonard Bernstein, who was born one hundred years ago.

Even more so than in previous years, the 20 nearly sold-out concerts by international youth orchestras struck a clear musical counterpoint to the policies of political elites across the globe that are increasingly fueling fierce xenophobia and nationalism.

It was entirely appropriate that Leonard Bernstein was honored by this festival, which includes among its aims the promotion of peace and international understanding through music. Equally appropriate was the choice of the Schleswig-Holstein Festival Orchestra—the very same orchestra founded by Bernstein 31 years ago—to play at the end of the festival.

Their program included Bernstein's Symphonic Suite "On the Waterfront," the Symphonic Dances from "West Side Story" and the overture to *Candide*, as well as the violin concerto in D major by Erich Wolfgang Korngold, the Viennese composer who went into exile in the United States, and combined vibrant Viennese late Romantic music with sweeping Hollywood-style cinematic compositions. The result was truly cross-border music, drawing on the different traditions of old Europe and the New World of America. The performance, by the orchestra and solo violinist Charles Yang under the direction of British conductor Wayne Marshall, combined youthful enthusiasm with a sense of touching poetry.

Korngold was almost 20 years older than Bernstein and they were in some respects very different figures, but both came from Jewish families in Europe and Russia, and were torn between the different continents of their birth and much of their subsequent musical work.

Born in the US to a Russian-Jewish family, Bernstein promoted European composers such as Gustav Mahler—little-known in the US at the time but whose symphonies Bernstein conducted and recorded—as well as the Finnish composer Jean Sibelius and the Soviet composer Dmitri Shostakovich. Mahler in particular felt like a soul mate to Bernstein. It was Mahler

who once said that he felt homeless three times over—as a Bohemian in Austria, as an Austrian in Germany and a Jew in the world.

At his concerts in Berlin on December 23 and 25, 1989, on the occasion of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Bernstein conducted Beethoven's 9th Symphony, renaming the final movement "Ode to Freedom" instead of "Ode to Joy." Bernstein brought together musicians from the countries of all four former occupying powers, including the Soviet Union. Today, following numerous wars, he would undoubtedly think twice before renaming Beethoven's Ode.

The explosive music at the final concert was at times romantic, but also humorous and jazzy. Bernstein's combination of entertaining (or light) and serious music brought him close to the younger generation. It struck an unmistakably optimistic note at the end of the festival that left no one cold in the crowded concert hall.

This was underlined in an encore by the jam session between Wayne Marshall on piano and Charles Yang playing his violin as a guitar, rhythmically accompanied by the audience. At the end orchestra members embraced one another warmly.

The concert conveyed a message very different from the aggressive nationalism and anti-American stance put forward by the German foreign minister and echoed by leading media outlets in the past few days. As Leonard Bernstein once said, "The future of our world will be a common one for all peoples—or it will prove to be a very inhospitable future."

This basic mood of international collaboration and the joy of playing music together are central threads running through this festival.

The opening concert of the entire festival, by the South African orchestra MIAGI, which emerged from educational projects in the South African slum of Soweto, was a lavish multinational and multicultural highlight.

While German interior minister Horst Seehofer is building a massive system of camps for refugees from Africa and the Middle East and the European Union is shutting down its frontiers and permitting thousands of people to drown in the Mediterranean or die of thirst in the Sahara, the appearance by

MIAGI celebrated the cultural link with the impoverished continent of Africa.

The concert began with Beethoven's revolutionary music from his "Egmont Overture," followed by an idiosyncratic and sensitive rendition of the "Firebird Suite" by Igor Stravinsky. After that, the orchestra swung into Leonard Bernstein's wildly virtuosic jazz composition "Prelude, Fugue and Riffs" (with solo clarinet Visser Liebenberg) and then the orchestra suite "Rainbow Beats," composed by the 29-year-old British conductor Duncan Ward.

Ward called his work "a surprise journey through the African soundscape." In fact, the piece is marked by surprising contrasts, combining African, Arabic, Latin and North American and European melodies and dance rhythms. In its finale, the entire orchestra danced and sang, while the conductor performed a skillful break dance to the accompaniment of the concert hall audience.

In his introductory remarks, Ward rejected the idea that African youth have difficulties understanding European musical language of the period since the Enlightenment. Music is a "universal language," he said, and the members of MIAGI are "young, wild players" driven by "sheer passion," with a great "hunger to learn."

There were many other highlights at this year's Young Euro Classic festival. One example was the appearance of the traditional European Union Youth Orchestra (EUYO), which selects the best young musicians from all 28 EU countries each year. As the orchestra came into the concert hall they were greeted by the audience with thundering applause and foot stamping. Two years ago, the flagship project of European cultural policy ran into financial difficulties and only received further financing following considerable protests. In the wake of the Brexit vote, it is about to relocate its office from London to Italy.

The title of the program—"Pianistic Poetry against symphonic self-doubt—and a piece of pure zest for life," was fulfilled completely by the EUYO orchestra. The German premiere of "Fireworks" by the Polish composer Agata Zubel, a sparkling short work in which one can literally hear the sound of firecrackers hissing through the air and exploding, was awarded the Composers' Prize by the audience jury. The composer said of her work: "My intention with 'Fireworks' was to empower the listener and activate him, to join with him in his enthusiasm, rather than starting a debate about the actual or claimed identity of each individual."

After the Piano Concerto No. 2 by Chopin (soloist Seong-Jin Cho), the orchestra demonstrated its musical prowess with a moving interpretation of Tchaikovsky's tragic Symphony No. 5 in E minor.

In total, more than 35 works from the 20th and 21st centuries were performed this year, including 13 German premieres and world premieres. One attention grabber was the fusion of Bach's Piano Concerto in D minor BWV 1052 with techno

music by the Georgian Sinfonietta ensemble.

Along with the joy of playing music, experimentation and the festive mood, this year's festival also showed the great seriousness with which young musicians interpreted classical works.

A good example was the interpretation of Shostakovich's 11th Symphony by the National Youth Orchestra of Romania. The symphony was composed to commemorate the Bloody Sunday of 1905 in St. Petersburg. One could almost hear the attacks by Tsarist soldiers on demonstrators, feel the mourning for the dead in the third movement, and feel electrified at the finale, when march rhythms underpin the workers' determination to continue the revolution—accompanied by echoes of the Ukrainian revolutionary song "Beware Tyrants" and the Polish Varshavyanka.

The performance of the 14th Symphony for soprano, bass and chamber orchestra by Dmitri Shostakovich (1969) by the Youth Chamber Orchestra of St. Petersburg under the direction of Migran Agadzhanian was both impressive and deeply moving. The composer sought to protest "in the name of life on earth" against inevitable, unjust and sometimes premature death. The basis of the symphony is eleven poems by Federico García Lorca, Guillaume Apollinaire, Rainer Maria Rilke and the German-Russian poet Wilhelm Küchelbecker, which deal with war, imprisonment and suicide. The instrumentation and vocals (Karina Flores, soprano, Felix Kudryavtsev, bass) retained a laconic-fatalistic tone, without any religious overtones.

The gloomy death songs reverberate for a long time. The festive atmosphere of Young Euro Classic gave way to deeply felt tones of sadness and empathy for the victims of war and oppression.

The young musicians are surprisingly serious, "almost too serious ...," commented one German radio reporter. But, one could answer, it is today's serious world situation, which threatens the future of the entire younger generation, that resonates at this festival, despite all of the youthful joie de vivre.

For those able to access German television, some of Young Euro Classic's concerts can be heard at Arte Concert, including:

Until September 11: Youth Chamber Orchestra St. Petersburg

Until September 13: European Youth Orchestra

Until September 16: Georgian Sinfonietta



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