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Art before marketing



PAAVO JÄRVI:
"Messiaen",
Tonhalle-Orchester, Zurich
Alpha 2019

Why? Paavo Järvi, the new chief conductor of the Tonhalle Orchestra Zurich was expecting this question. "Because I am an Olivier Messiaen fan," he replies nonchalantly. "It's great music, and it gets played far too rarely. We have now released a small collection of masterpieces on CD."

Järvi is perfectly aware that the "why" was not, "Why are you playing the music of a French composer who lived from 1908 to 1992?", but rather, "Why are you beginning your work in Zurich with a tribute to Messiaen?" His explanation is quite matter-of-fact: "What happens when a conductor begins working with a German or Swiss-German orchestra? They start with Mahler, Bruckner or Brahms. But I wanted something different. Something that would make a statement and raise a few eyebrows. Art should always come before marketing."

Strictly speaking, 2 October 2019 marked the beginning of Järvi's second year in Zurich, not his first. This is down to Järvi's agents and the Tonhalle management team, whose creative scheduling enabled the Estonian to work frequently with the Tonhalle Orchestra during the 2018/19 season – and use this initial stint as an opportunity to casually slip in some Messiaen. With the microphones switched on, Tonhalle Maag turned into an impromptu recording studio.

Fifteen minutes here, a quarter of an hour there – Järvi gradually weaved his magic. Sprinklings of Messiaen, combined with a notably energetic take on Beethoven, resulted in some electrifying concert hall evenings.

Amid the soaring strings and horns, the music is otherwise very controlled. The firm influence of the conductor is audible, as is the desire of the musicians to oblige their new maestro. Each register almost eclipses the next. And when these works are played with such passion, it is easy for anyone to appreciate how wonderfully sumptuous and sensual modern music can be. During the symphonic meditation of "Les offrandes oubliées", the orchestra's luxuriant yet plaintive chords pull at the listener's heartstrings. The beseeching strings then whip up a veritable storm. This music oozes positivity, rescue is in sight. Our Estonian friend in smart-casual footwear has come to save the day.

CHRISTIAN BERZINS

Lilo Pulver



That contagious laugh! No report about Liselotte ("Lilo") Pulver is ever complete without reference to the ever-popular Swiss actress's trademark laughter. Pulver's 90th birthday in October was no exception. Although Pulver has now withdrawn from public life and lives in a retirement home in Berne, her city of birth, she marked her big birthday with the publication of "Was vergeht, ist nicht verloren" (What passes is not lost) – a book containing personal memoirs based on old photos, letters and notes. Having kept all her mementos, Pulver – born in 1929 to middle-class parents – has now decided to tell the story of a long life that few could have expected. It was not until after visiting commercial college that the young Pulver was allowed to take acting lessons. She would go on to have a glittering international career. It was especially in post-war Germany where the smiling Swiss belle became a star of the silver screen, thanks to films like "I Often Think of Piroschka". The Swiss public took her to their hearts in the 1950s, when she played the wholesome maid Vreneli in the Gotthelf adaptations "Uli the Farmhand" and "Uli the Tenant". She later proved how talented and versatile an actress she was in the French New Wave film "The Nun" – and in American director Billy Wilder's comedy "One, Two, Three", in which she pulls off a dancing tabletop parody of Marilyn Monroe. In her private life, Pulver took some hard blows, with her daughter committing suicide and her husband dying of a heart attack. However, the 90-year-old recently denied press reports claiming that she was very lonely. "I am very satisfied with my life overall," she said, adding that she still has plenty of reasons to burst into that legendary laughter every day.

SUSANNE WENGER