Baltic Musical Gems

This is the ramblings and discoveries of a Makem composer currently studying in Lithuania. Discussing new works as well as old, hidden classics, this blog will show the world what there is to love in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.

8 June 2017

Vidurnakcio saule



Last night in the buzzing atmosphere of the Filharmonie grand hall, was the second concert of the Vilnius Festival 2017. This particular concert drew quite a large crowd due to its guest soloist Mario Brunello and, especially in my case, the premiere of Juste Janulyte's *Vidurnakcio saule* or Midnight Sun. Now traditionally I would have avoided writing about the concert as there is only one Baltic composer in it, but I am very eager to make an exception in this circumstance. So in short the post is a bit off kilter from my usual ramblings.

So, lets begin! After the usual chitter-chatter to introduce the concert, festival, orchestra, thanking sponsors, and mention everyone to some lesser or greater extent, the concert began with the famous *Adagietto. Sehr langsam* from Mahler's fifth. I always have mixed feelings about ensembles and concerts programming this element of the symphony on its own, mostly because the sheer magnitude of the movements comes after the gut-wrenching turmoil of the preceding movements, either as a tonic to, or reluctant acceptance of the whole. Just performing the one movement on its own is a bit like smashing a *Kinder Surprise* and robbing the toy, without at least working through the chocolate beforehand. Anyways, the performance was done rather masterfully, and Modestas Pitrenas really came alive in the work, which he conducted from memory. What particularly attracted me to Pitrenas's rendition was his ability to conduct from memory and not do the conductor habit of staring at the now, non-existant stand; this allowed him to truly interact with the orchestra intimately and the effect was strong. My other joy came from the layout of the orchestra. As the ensemble were set up to perform the following premiere, the orchestral layout had cellos at the front with double-basses in the centre at the back, and violins and violas in an arc. This had the wonderful power of making the whole work sound grounded and more grandly weighted. A nice surprise indeed.

After some shuffling, and grand applause for the entering soloist came *Vidurnakcio saule* by Juste Janulyte. After the sheer success of her premiere in Riga, I was intrigued how she would respond to writing for soloist and ensemble again. Especially for the cello. An instrument with such a huge historic gravitas behind it, that makes writing a concerto for it an almost terrifying burden for any composer.

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The work started with hushed murmurs from the heavily muted soloist. His gestures heavily austere and restrained. The orchestra glistening like glass. Each entry was extremely intimate and continued a huge intense fragility throughout the work. The soloist was never overtly virtuosic, but Brunello's control of such disparate and timid material was insane. Many lesser performers would have cracked with such material. As the work progressed, the gate was slowly loosened, with practice mutes being swapped for the traditional mutes; bringing with it a greater energy. The work began to shrink away into nothingness before suddenly breaking into an intensely powerful climax. The entire hall was filled with sound, which was truly incredible when you consider the ensemble were just strings. From the disappearing wave of sound, the screaming soloist finally emerges after almost drowning in the sea of noise.

This work did challenge me, mostly because what on this earth quite compares to it. And in reality there are very few works that seem to be achieving the same; or at least treating such a soloist in the same manner. *Harold in Italy* by Berlioz is the obvious comparison with its famous non-hero viola; but that still had the soloist dictating a narrative. This work didn't really strive for that. Another comparison is with Ligeti's cello concerto, but that two-movement work at least allowed the cellist out of his cage to have a wild moment at the end of the work. *String Quartet and Orchestra* by Feldman feels like the best comparison, with its fragile interactions and profound stillness. But still it is an inadequate comparison as the dynamic between soloist and orchestra still had 'friction' or a 'clash' between each other. My only real conclusion on the dynamic of the duality between the two is the idea that this work was a true concerto in an almost baroque sense. The two elements were at odds with each other. The soloist constantly trying to dictate a narrative, and the orchestra either submitting or retorting to it. The climax is quite so profound as it almost sees the ensemble realise that alone, they cannot beat the soloist, but united there is a chance. Which is where we see the soloist screaming in defiance. Only just managing to quell the weight and power of the united orchestra. For a piece that murmured for an extremely long length of time, it really had a lot to say.

It must also be noted, after the wonderful performance by Mario Brunello, he performed a truly beautiful encore. I sadly did not catch the name of it, all I can say is it was beautiful!

After the break, the orchestra had returned for the final two pieces. The overture *Ruy Blas* by Mendelsohn and his 4th symphony. I was highly confused by the inclusion of these two pieces in the concert, mostly because of the fact they were so out of character with the rest of the concert. The theme was 'Italian' but there is such a huge history of Italian music, surely something could have fitted better. I understand concerts have to sell tickets, and god forbid assuming people might be coming for a contemporary piece, but if you can truly match up pieces well; the overall impact is vastly superior. This really was my sole complaint of the second half, as the orchestra had a lovely vibrancy and charm when performing these works, and Pitrenas really shows this is HIS repertoire, as he was even more endearing as a conductor with these works.

I am a bit gutted I won't be able to catch tonight's concert dedicated to Osvaldas Balakauskas, but anyone who can go I cannot recommend it highly enough!

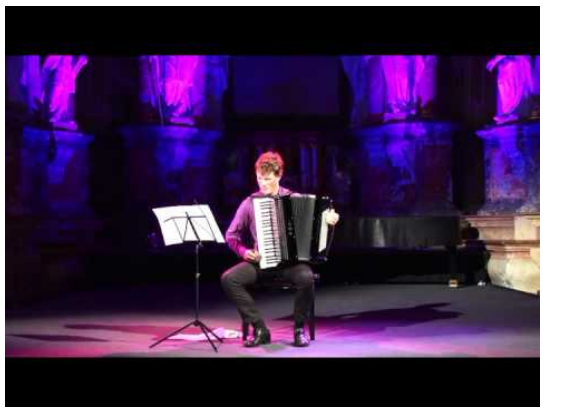
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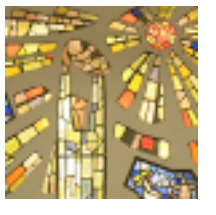
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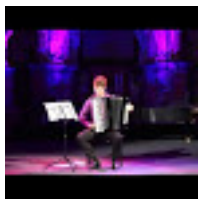


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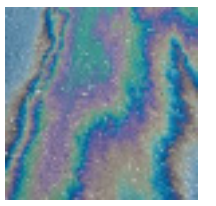
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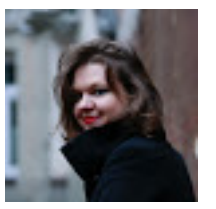
Twenty Fingers, plus another ten

And so Druskomanija Festival finds itself in the Gothic Hall of the art academy. The quiet, modest, arched hall has been a wonderful plac...



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This evening was my first concert in Vilnius in quite some time and boy was it an intriguing event. In short, the concert was a perform...



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Last night in a whimsically chilly church. Melos kamerinis moteru choras gave their official Lithuanian debut, performing works of living c...

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And so it begins, Druskomanija 2016 , before tonight I would never have thought a skate park could be a great acoustic for an orchestral co...

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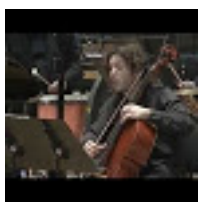
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Young composers in the Gothic Hall.

Last night I was involved in a concert of young composers from various walks of life recent graduates, masters, and bachelors students. The...



And off we go GAIDA 2016

So after a long wait of eager anticipation GAIDA 2016 has begun. As mentioned in my last post, GAIDA 2016 joined me in celebrating their 26...



Druskomanija takes over LMTA

Its that time of year again, Druskomanija Festival is up and running with lots of music being displayed. Sadly I had missed the opener b...

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