

A matter of fulfilment

Ati Metwaly indulges her appetites

Kodaly: Dances of Galanta for orchestra; Szymanowski: Concerto for Violin and Orchestra No. 1 Op. 35; Dvorak: Symphony No. 8 in G Major Op. 88. Cairo Symphony Orchestra, soloist: Monika Urbaniak Lisik, conductor: Marc Kissoczy. Cairo Opera House Main Hall, 24 September

Following the opening of the season a week earlier, on 24 September, the second concert of the Cairo Symphony Orchestra was conducted by Marc Kissoczy. Born in Canada to Hungarian-Swiss parents, Kissoczy's musical education took place in Zurich, Basel and Berne. His resume displays an impressive array of experiences with orchestras all around Europe as well as in Brazil, Taiwan and Vietnam. A professor of orchestral conducting at the University of the Arts in Zurich, he has also received awards and honours for his accomplishments. This was not Kissoczy's first time with the Cairo Symphony Orchestra; in 2007, he conducted its performance of Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 1 in D-major, "The Titan."

The evening opened with Z. Kodaly's Dances of Galanta, composed in 1933 as a gift for the 80th anniversary of the Budapest Philharmonic Society, which staged it in the same year. The composition refers to traditional Hungarian melodies and gypsy dances known especially to Galanta, a small and vibrant market town and a stopover for travellers moving between Vienna and Budapest. Notwithstanding its brilliant orchestration, with signature parts for the solo clarinet, the nationalist verve of this composition makes it one of the more energetic items of concert repertoires. With the first few bars Kissoczy demonstrates remarkable understanding of his material and enough skill to fully express his vision. As such, the dances worked as an inviting aperitif before a rewarding musical feast.

The second composition was Concerto for Violin and Orchestra No. 1, Op. 35 by Karol Szymanowski, the internationally renowned Polish composer. Rarely performed in Egypt, Szymanowski calls for a full introduction:

Born in 1882, he was Kodaly's contemporary, so he lived and composed in a time of abundance of genius, with Richard Wagner, then Richard Strauss, then even more revolutionary composers like Igor Stravinsky and Bela Bartok. Surrounded and influenced by such great names, Szymanowski took part in some of the major stylistic changes characterising the music created at the beginning of the 20th century. In no time, however, he also found his own voice, adapting to the new realities.

Szymanowski is unique in the history of music. His extraordinary personality, as complex as it is rich, reflected not only an artistic sensitivity but a multitude of interests as well, which constantly enriched him as a composer: he could combine romanticism with impressionism, but it was in an expressionist mould that his later music came into being.

Musicologists divide Szymanowski's work into three periods. The first, ending in 1914, shows the influence of Richard Strauss and Richard Wagner with compositions classified as late-romantic and "Germanic" in style. The second period (1914-1918) shows the impressionist influence of Ravel and Debussy as well as an emerging expressionism. This second period saw the composition of Violin Concerto No. 1, regarded as a very mature work. The third musical period (1922-1937) saw Szymanowski reaching out to nationalism with elements Polish folklore from Kurpie, Tatry and other highlands.

Szymanowski composed Violin Concerto No 1, Op 35 in the autumn of 1916 in Zarud (Ukraine). It premiered on 1 November 1922 in Warsaw and two years later in the USA with the New York Philharmonic. It is seen as Szymanowski's first modern violin concerto: an impressionistic work ruled by the aesthetics of expressionism, not romanticism. Like a long poem, it is full of colour and dotted with moments of rapture and tension.

Monika Urbaniak Lisik is a Polish violinist who lives in Switzerland and performs all across the world. The choice of a Polish violinist for Szymanowski's concerto added an interesting accent to the evening. Her zealous reading of the concerto allowed it to sparkle as the listener was taken from dreamy plains to bravura peaks and back again. Lisik's impressive technical ease managed to bring to the surface the intelligence hidden in this concerto. Sensual and surprising, Szymanowski in the hands of Lisik was consistent but never monotonous, with each section presenting a new voyage which by the end combines with all the others to yield a marvelous whole. Though this music doesn't have the usual emotional charge sought after by listeners, the composition carries mental elements which in themselves provide a great pleasure. Its perfect structure filled with colour was masterfully rendered by Lisik.

Although, compared to other violin concerti, Szymanowski's work requires an orchestra bigger in size, the composer's brilliant orchestration keeps the solo line always clear.

The final part of the evening comprised Dvorak's Symphony No. 8 in G Major. Composed in only a few weeks in 1889, the work infuses Bohemian folk motifs expressed through cheerful accents. And as much as Szymanowski's concerto shed light on the violinist's skill, Dvorak's was a showcase of the conductor's.

The complex first movement (*Allegro con brio*), showing a positive spirit and breathtaking vitality, was brought to the light by Kissoczy's shaping of many interesting details. The *Adagio* (second movement), soaked in optimistic sunshine, filled with unpredictable mood shifts, led to an elegantly floating *Allegro grazioso* "molto vivace" (third movement), while the final *Allegro ma non troppo* (fourth movement) took the listener through a string of climaxes before its brilliant ending.

In the programme notes, Azza Madian picks the perfect quote from a Czech biographer of Dvorak: "this symphony is a simple lyric singing of the beauty of our country for the artist's consolation. It is a lovable expression of a genius who can rejoice with the idyllicism of his own forbears."

Kissoczy went deep into Dvorak's rich material, stressing valuable phrases and underscoring solos, which were mostly well performed by the musicians. His skill and understanding of music requires no further comment. Despite some minor flaws, it was a pleasure to listen to a proper symphonic concert at last after so many mediocre concerts under foreign batons. Profound respect for music and audience alike.