

'Farewell'**Joseph Haydn: Symphonies Nos. 39 and 45****Isang Yun: Chamber Symphony I****Munich Chamber Orchestra, Alexander Liebreich**

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A year and a half after Alexander Liebreich succeeded Christoph Poppen as artistic director of the Munich Chamber Orchestra, their first recording is about to be released. As always the orchestra, cited twice this decade by the German Music Publishers Association for the best-programmed season, is striking out on challenging and unconventional paths. Each season is governed by a guiding theme; new concert formats are put to the test; and new works are commissioned on a regular basis. (In early December 2007 it gave the world première of Erkki-Sven Tüür's 'Questions...' with the Hilliard Ensemble in Frankfurt.) This new release, the orchestra's eighth album for ECM, reflects not only its precept to keep its repertoire deliberately open-ended, but Liebreich's special predilection for Isang Yun, a composer whose music he came to understand in its cultural context during an extended stay in Korea.

Interview with Alexander Liebreich

There are well-known musicians who still like to speak of Haydn as one of history's most underrated composers. What's your view?

Alexander Liebreich: That's still true to a certain extent, but things are changing. Simon Rattle even took Haydn along on his American tour, choosing the early symphonies. The problem as I see it is the claim that Haydn is essential to our orchestral culture because the symphonic tradition began with him. That implies that his music doesn't have any merits of its own.

Haydn as a basic introduction ...

Exactly. Yet precisely the so-called 'Sturm und Drang' symphonies are hugely inventive in their form! Haydn never again questioned the basic symphonic design so fundamentally or granted himself as much license as in, say, the 'Farewell' Symphony. Later his new ideas had more to do with sound. Speaking personally, the importance of the 'Farewell' Symphony is not so much the idea that the musicians successively leave the stage. I see it more as a farewell to form: when the presto is followed by an adagio that gradually evaporates, it's like a fade-out.

Yet back then form was not something fixed and codified, as in the nineteenth century.

Hardly. Every great composers had this element of liberation; we need only think of Mozart's frequently asymmetrical groups of bars or the way he sometimes seems to cobble his melodies together from prefabricated parts. Or think of the completely startling opening of Beethoven's First - on a dominant seventh!

Was Haydn more concerned with working on form or with freedom of expression?

Surely the latter, especially given that these symphonies are swept along by terrific rhythmic and propulsive force. It even leads to almost obsessive minimalist repetitions in the final movement of the 'Mourning' Symphony, where the course of the music is truly emancipated from vocal idioms.

Does a Haydn orchestra of today have to respect historically informed performance practice?

The question of style is not so urgent, and it's been debated long enough. This music is straightforward and speaks so clearly for itself that we no longer have to ask ourselves how we want to play it. The crucial thing is what the text demands from us in musical terms. If it were meaningful, for example, to appear with sixteen first violins, I'd be perfectly willing to do so. But it simply doesn't work because the energy and propulsion so central to Haydn would be lost.

Why Haydn and Yun?

That has an autobiographical side. I spent four years as a visiting professor in North Korea for the German Academic Exchange Service. I taught at the Isang Yun Institute in Pyongyang; I met his family and worked with the orchestra he founded there. I learned a lot from North Korea's special style of singing. Koreans sing everywhere and at every opportunity. It already began at the airport when I first met my interpreter, chauffeur and guide - the indispensable escort for every official visitor. All of Yun's compositions come from this expressive *cantando*. He liked to assign the role of the human voice to the strings. He himself was a cellist, of course, and the special role he felt for the cello is closely linked to his complicated personal history.

Yun's scoring follows along the lines of the early classical symphony, but the instruments take on a completely different character.

They certainly do. Yun likes to write in pairs; he frequently inserts dialogue-like sequences between the two oboes or two horns and between the strings. He also assigns quite distinct functions to the instrumental groups - the horns, for example, are almost invariably used with apodictic panache.

Haydn's restless energy vs. Yun's stream of melody: is the antithesis overstated?

It's true that Yun's music is less rhythmic and propulsive. The stream of sound flows on, articulated by a principle of action and reaction. One impulse triggers a counter-impulse: it's yin and yang, the microcosm in the macrocosm. A sharp pizzicato in the bass, say, will be answered by a violent gesture in the high register. There's a philosophical component to this concept that musicians cannot extract from their parts but which they absolutely must know about. There's no underlying pulse for the individual to rely on in case of doubt, so the conductor has to work out these processes of action and reaction all the more deliberately.

Apart from its scoring, what made you choose this Chamber Symphony in particular?

It comes from a period in Yun's career when his personal style - his pattern of an ever-ascending stream of sound - had fully emerged. The earlier pieces after his Darmstadt period, even those with expressly Korean titles, are much more European in outlook. In this piece he

chose a neutral title with, of course, European overtones, but paradoxically his Korean idiom comes much more noticeably to the fore. Perhaps this Chamber Symphony is the most 'genuine' Yun of all - expressive, completely free and personal.

What importance does this first recording with your new orchestra have for you?

Our sessions in the Munich Himmelfahrtskirche were open-ended, meaning that we really could record until everyone was satisfied. So this album has perhaps become a profession of faith in what we can accomplish together musically and the breadth of the repertoire we feel responsible for. It also points to a firm cultural bond between Europe and Asia that means a great deal to me.

Interview: Anselm Cybinski

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