



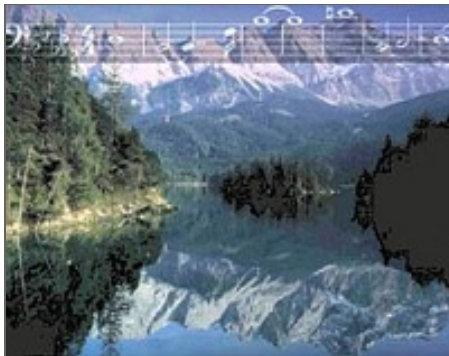
A New Face Scales the Alps

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Pierre-Laurent Aimard / Philippe Jordan

By Jeff Dunn



When Philippe Jordan conducted the Gustav Mahler Youth Orchestra at the Proms in London last year, a critic wrote that Jordan and his ensemble could "whip up musical Viagra." With all that testosterone, the Swiss conductor seemed certainly capable of striding effortlessly to the summits of Richard Strauss' gargantuan *Eine Alpensinfonie* at Davies Symphony Hall Friday, and he did so admirably. Even more commendable, however, was his reinvigoration of a warhorse brought in from pasture after 15 years, Beethoven's "Egmont" Overture.

Jordan's is a striking presence on the podium. Lean, posture-perfect, he is already a master of the balletic gesture, bending deeply from the waist or assuming statuesque poses with the broad hand or curiously extended elbow to emphasize points of interpretation. It comes as no surprise that he has been cutting so fine a figure in Europe, filling significant posts at the Berlin State and Graz operas while fulfilling numerous guest-conducting invitations. Starting in 2009, he will be the music director of the Opera National de Paris, succeeding James Conlon after a five-year hiatus. Having celebrated his 33rd birthday only two weeks ago, he's a welcome new visitor to the San Francisco Symphony season.

What most impressed me is that Jordan refused to take the stereotypical young conductor's approach of juicing up tempos to breakneck rates. Using tried and true, conventional tempos, he instead concentrated on revelatory subtleties of interpretation, most successfully in the "Egmont." Here his attention to expanding the weightiness of the introduction, varying the dynamics of timpani flourishes, and feathering seamless transitions brought rich rewards and an enthusiastic reception.

Tone Poem Fit for an Army

Strauss' "Alpine" Symphony presents fewer challenges to the interpreter than it does to the herder: The score is riddled with instructions and descriptions of scenes, but it requires more instrumentalists than sheep on Dick Cheney's Wyoming ranch. In addition to a vast onstage ensemble, including 20 to 26 woodwind and 22 brass instruments, 12 additional brass players were required for an offstage hunting party.

All this to glorify a hike in the Alps. But the glory is overblown for the quality of the material, which is too facile. As the Strauss biographer Normal Del Mar remarked, listeners must "wade through much of which is essentially the half-playful note spinning of a fluent master." Most of the tunes are less than memorable, except where they remind of better ones in Wagner, or the Bruch Violin Concerto. A tune that does grab me, however, is the opening motive in B-flat minor that stands for the mountain itself. Its angular line may well fit the contours of an eagle-high ridge near Strauss' Bavarian estate.



Strauss' Alpine Theme

With the lack of exceptional material, the audience must enjoy the music solely from the pictorial standpoint, a forte of Strauss' that prompted him to brag, around the time of the work's composition, that "at last" he could orchestrate and, if required, he could even describe a knife and fork in music. Yet I am not aware of anyone who has produced this monument to aural cinematography with supertitles to project Strauss' descriptions of the 22 scenes it depicts. This is a shame, since a majority of them cannot be detected without reference to the score. The San Francisco Symphony program at least provided the minimum, a list of the scenes. But aside from the sunrise, waterfall, summit experience, storm, and sunset, I doubt if most listeners knew what was going on, other than playful mastery.

Fresh Take on a New Tonality

Jordan, however, certainly knew. As in the Beethoven, he handled transitions smoothly. For example, when the "Ascent" scene changes key to the C minor of "Entry into the Forest," too many conductors treat this as a sudden blast ? as if an enormous tree fell on the hiker. True, the passage is marked fortissimo, but the preceding material is likewise marked fortissimo. Jordan treated the new tonality instead as a welcome stride into the shade, a refreshing conception. Throughout, his tempos were perfectly chosen, his climaxes impressive without being exaggerated, his sense of the overall arc of the music as sound as the massif itself. The players, for their part, by and large (with a couple of bloopers here and there) performed magnificently. Of the many fine moments, the offstage hunting party was the most exciting and note-perfect, yet aside from four horn players who merged back into the orchestra, we never saw the rest of the excellent crew. Strauss put their music in as a sideshow, with both musicians and their themes never to return.

The most famous part of the work is the storm sequence, realistic to a fault, even including a quick backward run through all the vistas encountered on the way up as the climber runs downhill for shelter. Yet, despite Jordan's fine conducting, I was left wishing I were hearing the storm from Britten's Peter Grimes, or even Rossini's William Tell.

Between the "Egmont" and intermission, Pierre-Laurent Aimard performed Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto with a priestly precision worthy of his two professorships in Paris and Cologne. Every note in its place, there was no hint of the huge hike, or the adventures and misadventures in mountaineering to follow.