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An Emerging Conductor in a Program of Re-emerging Works

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By Anthony Tommasini



Rachel Papo for The New York Times

Philippe Jordan conducting the New York Philharmonic.

During the Kurt Masur years, the New York Philharmonic was fairly criticized for not trying hard enough to bring young conductors to its podium. But under Lorin Maazel, the orchestra has done much better at showcasing today's emerging maestros.

Last week the 26-year-old Venezuelan dynamo Gustavo Dudamel made his Philharmonic debut, and on Thursday night there was another: the 33-year-old Swiss conductor Philippe Jordan.

Mr. Jordan, the son of the renowned conductor Armin Jordan, was recently appointed music director of the Paris National Opera, starting in 2009. He has worked with major international orchestras, enjoyed a formative relationship with the Vienna Philharmonic and will conduct his first performances of Wagner's "Ring" cycle with the Zurich Opera next season.

This fall at the Metropolitan Opera I was much taken with his work in Mozart's "Nozze di Figaro." There was youthful vitality in his performance but also poise, spaciousness and refinement: qualities that typically come only with maturity.

The most opulently orchestral work on Mr. Jordan's Philharmonic program came in the second half, with selections from "Ma Vlast" ("My Fatherland"), Smetana's suite of picturesque tone poems, completed in 1874. But the performance that most revealed Mr. Jordan's talents was that of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor, with Pierre-Laurent Aimard as soloist. Since this is a work that Mr. Jordan has also played as a pianist, he knows it inside and out.

In the long, dark and moody orchestral introduction to the first movement, Mr. Jordan projected the severe, weighty grandeur of the music. His approach recalled that of the magisterial Otto Klemperer, though with a cooler, more contemporary attitude. He drew out intricate details and organic elements of the music: a tremulous bass line struggling to descend, the tension of pungent woodwind harmonies that undercut the genial second theme.

Mr. Aimard was of the same mind in his serious approach. As always with this keenly intelligent pianist, his



playing was alive with nuance, shadings and drama. In accompaniment figures, every note had something to say. When the music built to outbursts of bustling major-mode exuberance, Mr. Aimard played with crystalline sound, fleet passagework and uncanny clarity.

Mr. Aimard waited a long while, until the audience's coughing and the ringtones of a cellphone had ceased, before beginning the contemplative solo theme in the slow movement. His performance was noble, poetic and mysterious. In the finale the time for restraint was over, as Mr. Aimard and Mr. Jordan conveyed the brilliance, humor and, at times, danger in the music.

The program opened with Dvorak's "Czech Suite," in five folkloric movements, last heard at the Philharmonic in 1920. Mr. Jordan found the wistful core of the leisurely polka, and the charm of the minuet, with its delightfully irregular phrase lengths and the rustic rhythmic hiccup that interrupts the tender melody.

The complete "Ma Vlast" is a sprawling score of six episodic tone poems lasting 75 minutes, impressions of the composer's Bohemian homeland and people when he was ailing, late in life. Except for "The Moldau," with its surging melody and watery colorings, you seldom hear these pieces. Mr. Jordan conducted four of them, 45 minutes of music including the "The Moldau," from memory. That he loves this ruminative and inspired music came through in the urgent, sweeping and sonorous playing he drew from the Philharmonic.

The Dvorak and Smetana performances, though rich and vibrant, had glitches here and there. Mr. Jordan seems not the most incisive technician. Perhaps the Philharmonic players were still adjusting to his approach. Still, this was a promising debut of a thoughtful musician, a conductor on the move.

Philippe Jordan will conduct the New York Philharmonic tonight at Avery Fisher Hall, Lincoln Center; (212) 721-6500, nyphil.org.