



The Youth Movement

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By Jay Nordlinger

The New York Philharmonic has been sponsoring a youth movement on its podium of late. Two weeks ago, Gustavo Dudamel, age 26, made his Philharmonic debut. Last week, Philippe Jordan, age 33, made his Philharmonic debut. If you combine their years, you've almost reached the average age of a respectable conductor.

Mr. Jordan is more than respectable (and so is Mr. Dudamel, for that matter). He comes from Switzerland, the son of the late conductor Armin Jordan. He has appeared on many of the most important podiums in the world. And, two seasons from now, he will assume the directorship of the Paris Opera. He will have many big-time posts before he's through ? probably as many as he wants.

On Friday morning, Mr. Jordan had a superb outing with the Philharmonic; indeed, it was a memorable one. He began with Dvořák's Czech Suite, a five-movement affair, full of dances. This is an overlooked item in the Dvořák catalog: The Philharmonic had not played it since 1920. Under Mr. Jordan, the score breathed pleasantness, beauty, and grace. At the same time, there was the right amount of Bohemian earth in it. I imagine some people wanted to get up and dance.

The young man's conducting was balanced, judicious, and totally musical. The music was given both a proper rhythmic character and a proper tonal character. The Polka was fun, as a polka should be, but refined. The Sousedská ? yes, Sousedská ? featured gentleness within merriment. Throughout the suite, we heard a kindness. This is not a common quality in music.

We also heard some very, very good flute playing ? pure, bright, and singing ? and some equally good English-horn playing. The Philharmonic's woodwinds at large had a good day.

Dvořák's last movement is a "furiant," and this was duly peppy, but not too fast. The tempo allowed for enjoyment (and for dancing, come to that). And I might mention the final note: Mr. Jordan did not hold it a millisecond too long. This may seem a tiny detail, but it makes a difference. Lorin Maazel, the Philharmonic's music director, knows when to cut 'em off, too.

Mr. Jordan led one of the most distinguished and satisfying orchestral performances we have had all season. As he conducts, he uses as many gestures as necessary, but none is wasted. Somehow, he is economical yet full ? laissez-faire when he can be, more imposing when needed. Put most succinctly, Dvořák's Czech Suite was governed by a clear musical intelligence.

Next, we had a concerto: Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor, Op. 37, in which the soloist was Pierre-Laurent Aimard, the French musician. His playing was neat, proficient, and authoritative. He shares with Mr. Jordan a fine sense of phrasing and rhythm. His Beethoven was disciplined, and you might even say



"historically correct." Now and then, he was on the severe side, and might have shown a speck more heart. But he was never airless or unmusical.

Mr. Aimard is known as a brainy musician, and that he is. But let it be acknowledged that he has no little piano technique. The first movement's cadenza, for example, was impressive in its speed, in its accuracy ? in its sheer, bracing virtuosity.

And something quite curious happened at the beginning of the middle movement, the Largo. The piano begins it alone. And Mr. Aimard had about four false starts. There was a little coughing in the audience, and the pianist would not begin until it had ceased. He had his hands above the keyboard several times, but then there'd be a cough, and he'd put his hands down, sometimes giving the audience a schoolmarmish look. I believe this was a mistake. If he had focused on the music ? his task ? he would have brought the audience to him, quickly.

In any event, Mr. Aimard delivered a first-rate account of Beethoven's C-minor concerto. So did Mr. Jordan and the Philharmonic. The orchestra's playing was both lithe and full-bodied ? the conductor achieved the desirable tonal weight. Sometimes, Beethoven's music seemed on little cat feet, as it must. Occasionally, the orchestra's sound was a little hard, but not offensively so. In the Rondo, Beethoven's brief fugal portion is easy to botch ? but these guys did not. And, perhaps most important, Messrs. Aimard and Jordan were of one mind.

Since I spoke earlier of a final note, I might as well say this: Mr. Jordan made the concerto's final note very short, bouncy ? "period"-like. Hmm: I'm not sure it was entirely Beethoven-like.

After intermission, Mr. Jordan returned to Czech music, conducting four selections from Smetana's "Má Vlast," or "My Homeland." These included the beloved depiction of the river Moldau. When audience members recognized it, they let out a happy sigh.

I will serve up some clichés: Mr. Jordan's Smetana was "atmospheric," "panoramic," "evocative." These may be clichés, but they're apt. The conductor simply expressed what the composer wished, and what the score cries out for. He was fully Romantic without being the least overblown. He led the orchestra without being a dictator over it. The Philharmonic responded with its best playing.

So, the audience on Friday morning heard music-making of a very high order, and they saw a conductor whose career is a boon. Sometimes, ladies and gents, the news is good.