

Hamburg Symphony in tune with Brahms at Kravis Center

By David Fleshler
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The Hamburg Symphony Orchestra came to the Kravis Center in West Palm Beach on Sunday for a performance that included a work by Hamburg's greatest composer, Johannes Brahms. The orchestra performs another Brahms symphony tonight at the Broward Center.

Although Brahms left Hamburg for Vienna early in life, the city exerted a powerful force on his development. As a child, he was forced to play piano in the bars and brothels of the city's St. Pauli district, an experience that warped his relations with women. In Hamburg he first heard the Hungarian Gypsy music that would course through his works like electricity. And there he came under the wing of the fine teacher Eduard Marxsen, who steeped him in Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert.

So how does the Hamburg Symphony play the music of its favorite son?

First, the bad news: This is not one of the great and historic European orchestras. Founded in 1957, the Hamburg Symphony lacks the numbers, particular the weight of strings, to deliver the rich, full-bodied sound that comes from the best ensembles. There was sloppy horn and trumpet playing, and the violins and cellos were sometimes ragged in their attack.

But the musicians, making their first U.S. tour, played Brahms' Symphony No.2 with enthusiasm and sensitivity. Under the direction of the well-regarded Russian conductor Andrey Boreyko, the orchestra found the dark inner voices with which the composer tempered the otherwise sunny music. The end of the symphony's slow second movement glowed with the requisite warmth; in the third movement, the orchestra's very good wind section played with a lilt and sprightliness.

More good news: The violinist Robert McDuffie joined the orchestra for an electrifying performance of the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto. The tall, dark-haired Georgia native is an exciting performer. He is not one of those violinists whom critics like to describe as "patrician" or who make it look easy. He works hard and it shows. When he plays a rapid passage in double-stops -- when two notes are sounded at once -- he bends at the knees and lowers his head as if he were shoulder-pressing 300 pounds. When he takes a run up to the upper reaches of the fingerboard, he completes it with a flourish.

The first movement unfolded with an urgency that is rarely achieved. Even the lyric melodies had a propulsive force. While this sort of performance may not be to everybody's taste, it was a different and thrilling take on a familiar work.

McDuffie will perform another violin warhorse, Bruch's Concerto No.1, tonight at the Broward Center, in an 8 p.m. program with the Hamburg Symphony that includes music of Brahms and Schubert. Call 954-462-0222 or go to concertfla.org.

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