

El Sistema Strikes Again -- in Lucerne

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MusicalAmerica.com

March 24, 2010

LUCERNE, Switzerland -- El Sistema, the phenomenal program in Venezuela that has brought music into the lives of young people on a perhaps unprecedented scale, now has over 300,000 participants. With a number like this, it is a reasonable proposition that its ranks might harbor other blossoming young conductors with gifts that approach those of Gustavo Dudamel, who soared like a rocket out of El Sistema a few years ago and is now music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

As a matter of fact, no less a luminary than Claudio Abbado has tapped one such young musician, Diego Matheuz, now 25, who last summer assisted him here in performances by the Lucerne Festival Orchestra of Mahler's Fourth Symphony. At the last minute, Abbado turned the dress rehearsal—an event open to the public—over to Matheuz. He made such an impact that when Antonio Pappano canceled three performances with Rome's Santa Cecilia Orchestra soon thereafter, including one at the Lucerne Festival, Matheuz took over.

He returned here on Monday evening, this time at the helm of El Sistema's showcase ensemble, the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela, for the last of three concerts at the ongoing Lucerne Easter Festival (the first two having been conducted by Abbado and Dudamel). The program consisted of Beethoven's Concerto for Violin D with Kolja Blacher, concertmaster of the Lucerne Festival Orchestra, and Shostakovich's Symphony No. 10.

It was a revelatory experience. For one thing, the Bolívar Orchestra generally shies away from the Viennese Classicists, at least on its international tours, in favor of late Romantic blockbusters that allow its youthful enthusiasm to operate at full throttle with results frequently of the knock-your-socks-off variety. Accordingly, in the Beethoven a listener was inclined to pay special attention to the orchestral accompaniment, while scarcely remaining oblivious to Blacher's sterling playing.

Figuring out ways to infuse Beethoven with period-performance practice is not part of the El Sistema agenda. The orchestra played with much of its usual vigor—the strings' incisive attacks on those four repeated notes taken over from the timpani opening still resound in my mind—yet Matheuz reined in the sound as needed to ensure an appealing sonority overall. He also interacted engagingly with Blacher, whose playing had a refinement and lyrical grace that set a fine example for his young colleagues. The second movement brought some affectingly hushed playing from soloist and orchestra alike, with Blacher's capacity for lyricism also surfacing in the smoothness of his phrasing of the third movement's sprightly rondo theme. For the first movement he played the cadenza Beethoven wrote as part of his revision of the Violin Concerto for piano. It brings back the timpani and introduces a march tune that has nothing to do with the concerto's thematic material.

Where conductor and orchestra really distinguished themselves, however, was in the Shostakovich. The Tenth Symphony, which I rank high in the canon, is said to include a musical portrait of Stalin. But it might just as well be a portrait of Shostakovich himself, so

characteristic is its mix of brooding pessimism and high-strung frenzy, while the composer's autobiographical D-S-C-H theme turns up repeatedly.

Among the most striking of the performance's many virtues was its maturity. Here, all concerned seemed to concentrate their talents on digging deep into the fabric of this difficult work. The arresting playing by the double basses of the lugubrious opening theme got the performance off to the right somber beginning, but this is a work of emotional extremes, something that Matheuz clearly appreciates. Climaxes in the piece often bring forth surging unison passages from the strings, and here the playing was consistently full bodied and vibrant. Winds too distinguished themselves, not least in the expressive solo playing by several at the start of the last movement.

This is indeed an orchestra to reckon with, and Matheuz, though less flashy on the podium than Dudamel, seems fully capable of bringing out its best. He ensured a degree of rhythmic vitality throughout, whether infusing slow passages with tension or launching into an ironic waltz rhythm. Truly manic moments, such as the symphony's close, turned shrill and relentless, but scarcely more so than the music calls for. It looks as if El Sistema has come up with another winner.