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CLASSICAL MUSIC REVIEW

Hamburg Symphony hails hometown hero Brahms

By LAWRENCE A. JOHNSON
lajohnson@MiamiHerald.com

One tends to think of European orchestras in terms of centuries-old traditions. By that standard, the Hamburg Symphony Orchestra, founded in 1957, is a mere sprig.

Now in its third season under the gifted Russian conductor Andrey Boreyko, the German orchestra is marking its 50th anniversary with a U.S. tour, which brought them Tuesday night to the Broward Center for the Performing Arts.

While clearly not in the top tier of European orchestras, the Hamburg Symphony is a more-than-respectable ensemble, with polished playing, forceful brass and rich, weighty violins. The all-German program provided welcome relief from the usual Russian-centric fare at Concert Association of Florida events.

Boreyko's influence was clear in the opener, Schubert's *Rosamunde* Overture, with the conductor drawing a firm line and emphatic accents. Yet the strenuous approach seemed much more Russian than German, with extreme tempos and breakneck speed that slighted Schubert's charm and elegance.

Since Hamburg is the birthplace of Johannes Brahms, it made eminent sense for Boreyko to program the composer's music on this anniversary tour. With the growing internationalization of the world's orchestra rosters, imputing nationalistic qualities is a tricky business, particularly with an organization that has only been around a few decades.

Still, the big-boned performance of Brahms' Symphony No. 1 seemed somehow infused with a more apt style. With its beefy strings and boldly projected brass, the Hamburg Symphony's playing had something of the beer hall about it, which gave Brahms' music greater punch and more idiomatic impact.

Boreyko's direction was a virtual seminar in Brahms conducting: tautly dramatic with resounding climaxes that still gave the lyrical moments ample room to expand. Apart from some fussy phrasing in the Andante, Boreyko consistently brought out the dark drama, with a fiery and exhilarating coda.

The Bruch Violin Concerto in G minor often suffers from its popularity, with many top-flight soloists simply showing up and going through the motions.

Not so with Robert McDuffie. The Georgia-born violinist possesses a sterling technique and invested Bruch's warhorse with a vitality and spontaneous lyricism that made it seem newly minted. The opening movement had bracing drive and dynamism, with McDuffie throwing off the finale with impressive bravura.

The soloist was at his finest in the central Adagio where he floated the main theme with the greatest tenderness, his violin tone winnowed down to a barely audible thread of sound. Boreyko and the orchestra provided McDuffie with equally sensitive and expressive support.