

A MESMERISING LISTENING EXPERIENCE

BY MORGAN REMAJ

Audience members at Stadtcasino Basel last Wednesday evening ventured through a mesmerising listening experience, initially stunned by the deadly opening drone of Anders Hillborg's piece *Sound Atlas*. The combination of a dying piano tone with the support of haunting orchestral colours was the beginning of listeners being transported into a timeless soundscape journey. Through a myriad of flutter notes, intricate conversations between brass and percussion, coupled with the sparse layers of metamorphic sounds, Shokhakov and the Sinfonieorchester Basel cast a hypnotic spell on listeners' sonic experience of the infinity of the universe. The glittering melancholic energy of a surreal brave new world radiating from this work, manifested an uncanny quiet and calmness throughout the entire hall over the 20-minute duration of the Swiss premiere of this work. Declaring his first notes as soloist with the iconic opening arpeggio from Tchaikowski's op. 35 violin concerto, the Finnish virtuoso Pekka Kuusisto installed a humble yet introverted presence which helped in the continuation of the intense subdued spirit that lingered after *Sound Atlas*. In addition to the airy sound of the violin which lavishly penetrated the Basel hall, Shokhakov and the Sinfonieorchester Basel communicated a sophisticated and controlled performance of this monumental work, with intelligent responses to harmonic changes in this well-rounded and exposed 19th century orchestral style. I found the «non-chalant» persona of Kuusisto on this occasion to be symptomatic of the reserved nature of this concerto performance with the double stops of the first movement highly contained and rather limited in projection. Unavoidably listening comparatively to Wednesday evenings performance of this immensely beloved work, I found myself in desire of a more generous performance by this violin soloist. By the second movement I became enchanted by the lyricism of Kuusisto in addition to the principal flutist who shone with exquisite phrasing. In the third movement Kuusisto definitively convinced the audience members, if he had not already, of the tenacity of his virtuosity, bringing listeners to a fiery close of this rendition of Tchaikowski. For a stunning finale of masterful Debussy, Shokhakov succeeded in creating yet another highly evocative sound universe in

Debussy's complex *La Mer*. Audience members beamed in adoration, in response to the performance of this last finale of well-balanced orchestral coloration, thanks to the responsive and flexible leadership of Shokhakimov. I was in awe of the near effortless execution made by the Sinfonieorchester Basel string section of Debussy's many timbre changes and technical difficulties imposed throughout the work. The conversations occurring between the wind sections in the first movement *De l'aube à midi sur la mer*, added for an entertaining and captivating display of chamber-music like ensemble communication. In comparison to Shokhakimov's convincing ability to create longevity and inspiration of the airy ethereal sounds of the pianissimo range in *Sound Atlas*, I was left partly dissatisfied by the lack of lightness in the sound he manifested from the orchestra in the opening pianissimo moments of the second movement, *Jeux de Vagues*. The second and third movement performances however benefited largely from the ongoing propulsion instilled by the rhythmic conducting of Shokhakimov, resulting in a well-rounded and elegantly phrased interpretation. The strikingly difficult task of accurately realising the sheer detail of Debussy's score indications, as rudimentary in bringing this work to life, was not taken lightly by this young conductor who respected and understood the architectural significance of articulation and dynamics, with an intelligent choice and deliverance of tempi.