

## «Fluid, Electric, and Colorful»

BY PIERRE-NICOLAS COLOMBAT

In its opening event of the season, the Sinfonieorchester Basel shined bright through effective programming, exciting personnel, and vibrant playing. It was an ambitious menu in terms of its length: the first half lasted one hour and on the other side of the pause loomed the vast second symphony of Brahms. The breadth of the music on offer however was compensated for with fluid, electric, and colorful performances of rather varied repertoire.

The evening opened with a coup of musical champagne: the Jussen Brother's performance of Mendelssohn's concerto for two pianos. Their smiling and spritely entrance on stage immediately caught the eye, lighting the room with energy and the dazzling performance that followed delivered on what their image promised. Bolton's orchestra proved excellent servants to the soloists both in dynamic sensitivity and flexibility in rubato. One might be slightly off-put by some of the young duo's gesticulations but their pearly pianism convinced enough in this well-suited repertoire. It is hard to imagine a more immaculate performance of the art of two-piano playing and Mendelssohn certainly makes it a challenge with his rapid figurations. The only down side of this crystalline clarity is that every move seemed to be forecasted and the performance lacked a touch of the improvised lyricism that is typical of this period's pianism. This hardly takes away from the great success of the brother's performance and the audience practically begged them for an encore.

Unsuik Chin's first entry as composer in residence, *Alaraph «Ritus des Herzschlags»* (2022), proposed a vastly different experience of what concert music can be. Gone were the pyrotechnics of 19th century virtuosity and lyricism. For all its difference's from the Romantic century's musical vocabulary, there nonetheless remains the idea that interiority, in its deepest sense, is a doorway into the vastness of Nature, and visa versa. In this case however, 19th century Nature is replaced with outer space. Sonically, the piece was a sort of orchestral dialogue between pitched and non-pitched sounds with Bartok pizzicati serving as a timbral bridge between the two poles. The ritual aspect of the work was also visual heightened by the five percussionists simultaneously using cymbals in a semi-circle at the back of the stage in a sort of druid-like manner. The heart-beat rhythm throughout provided a centering human element, if subconscious, amongst an otherwise colorful but arid landscape.

To be faced with Brahms's Op. 73 over one hour after the start of a concert is a potentially daunting proposition for any listener. Notorious for his motivic richness and certain interpreter's proclivity to create overly fatty orchestral textures, Brahms sometimes comes off as belabored and heavy. For this reason, it was refreshing to see Bolton's relatively lean orchestra take the stage for the second half of the show. Already in the opening horn motif, it was clear that the conductor's approach would be diligent in its respect of Brahms's slur markings and this allowed for a wonderful thinning of the orchestral texture and lubricated the piece's gentle forward flow. This is the sort of approach that makes the decision to take the exposition repeat (always a good choice, *especially* in Brahms), much more bearable and enjoyable. All while being loyal the expression of each musical idea, the group's overall rendition was touching and fun! What an unusual and refreshing word to use when talking about Brahms. Not only did this spirit harken back to the evening's opening with the buoyant Dutch duo, it served a bright send-off for the upcoming season!