

Bamberg, BA Phil offer great Colón concerts

Famous German orchestra returned to Buenos Aires under the baton of Jonathan Nott

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FOR THE HERALD

Two years ago, in an extended tour of what used to be West Germany, I finally got to know Bamberg and was charmed by the city. Rather small (70,000 people) but with a rich history, it has seven hills like Rome, a beautiful cathedral and a picturesque Old Quarter, and was declared a World Heritage Site by the UNESCO. It was spared during WWII and has 2,300 historic monuments.

Concerning music, something important happened: ex members of Prague's German Philharmonic (dissolved after the war) founded in 1946 with other players the Bamberger Tonkünstlerorchester, later baptized with its current appellation, the Bamberger Symphoniker (the Bamberg Symphony Orchestra). Their conductor, as in Prague, was Joseph Keilberth, and they visited BA in April, 1962; I vividly remember their performances of such standards as Beethoven's Third Symphony and Strauss' *Don Juan*, at a time when our city rarely received foreign orchestras.

Decades later, they returned under the baton of one of the best German conductors, Horst Stein (who had memorably premiered Schönberg's *Gurre-Lieder* at the Colón in November, 1964). And some years ago, the Bambergers came back conducted by Jonathan Nott, then and now their principal conductor.

Nott has been in charge since 2000 and this is his last year with the Bamberg Symphony, for he has a new post next year: director of the illustrious Suisse Romande Orchestra. Now he is also musical director of the Tokyo Symphony and principal conductor of the Junge Deutsche Philharmonie. This talented artist conducted opera at Frankfurt and Wiesbaden and held posts with the Ensemble Modern, the



Jonathan Nott conducts the Bamberg Symphony at the Colón, part of the Nuova Harmonia season.

Lucerne Symphony and the Ensemble Intercontemporain.

Now the moot point: a strange programme sandwiching Gershwin between two Beethovens. Months ago, the soloist in Gershwin's Concerto in F was to be that old friend of our city, Rudolf Buchbinder (among many other things, he played here the integral of the 32 Beethoven sonatas) but suddenly and with no explanation he was replaced with Maciej Pikulski, known here as a first-rate accompanist of singers (he played no less than Schubert's *Winterreise* with Van Dam and came last year with Christianne Stojtn). Many were surprised by Buchbinder's choice of work, so far from his usual repertoire; anyway, the pianist changed but not the score.

Frankly, Beethoven's dramatic *Egmont Overture* isn't a logical partner with Gershwin; such pieces as William Schuman's Festival Overture or Barber's *The School for Scandal* would have gelled naturally with the crossover American ways of Gershwin's fascinating jazzy mosaic. I found the pianist marvellously precise and virtuosic, even if not quite as idiomatic as Votapek was in this piece. And his encore was fantastic: Liszt's paraphrase of Verdi's *Rigoletto Quartet*. He should come back for a recital. But Nott's clean dissection of the score though very professional lacked the inflexions this music needs; and the mute trumpet solo in the second movement, certainly high and difficult, wasn't good enough.

However, both *Egmont* and the *Pastoral Symphony* (No. 6) were wonderful: the phrasing, the speeds were unerring, and the playing was beautiful throughout, especially from the flute and the oboe. The unusual disposition of the orchestra proved to be right: basses behind the first violins, second violins fronted with the firsts, cellos in the centre. The mellow string sound, the perfect cohesion and blending, showed that the Bamberg is a splendid exponent of the Central European orchestral art.

The encores added pleasure: a fast and joyous Mozart (Overture to *The Marriage of Figaro*) and the spine-tingling fourth (last) movement of the 1951 *Romanian Concerto* by Ligeti, with a wonderful solo by the concertino and brilliant conducting.

It was certainly a good idea to give us an all-English programme in the Phil's subscription series, for there's a lot of fine music from that school and so much of it isn't heard. Diemecke showed again his mettle and complete professionalism, and the orchestra had a very fine day. They started with the ample and brilliant *Crown Imperial March* by William Walton, originally for Edward VIII; but due to his abdication it was finally used for the coronation of George VI (1937).

The 45-minute Violin Concerto (1910) by Edward Elgar is along with the Brahms one of the longest in the repertoire, and, although it has its meandering moments, the music is warm, melodic and personal. Curiously, in March it was played by Xavier Inchausti with the National Symphony under Facundo Agudín, an admirable performance of this seldom played score. Now it was the return visit of Ilya Kaler, a first-rate exponent of the Russian school (disciple of Leonid Kogan and others): his playing was quite accomplished and convincing, a mite-less perfect than Inchausti's, but he and the orchestra were certainly helped by the Colón acoustics, so much better than the Stock Exchange's Main Hall. Kaler's encore was a tasteful rendition of the *Loure* (a slow dance) from Bach's Partita No. 3.

Britten's *Peter Grimes* is his masterpiece; from it he extracted the contrasting Four Sea Interludes and the Passacaglia, and they work ideally as concert pieces. A pity that Diemecke arbitrarily mixed the Passacaglia with the Interludes (the Passacaglia should be done separately) but the playing was intense and had much impact. We need much more: big pieces by Delius, Tippett; second hearings of great works (Elgar's two Symphonies, Vaughan Williams' Fourth and Sixth Symphonies) and a long etcetera.