

Brahms Alone, and With Schoenberg's Big Tweak

By ALLAN KOZINN

Just 22 hours after the last notes were sounded in Carnegie Hall's adventurous festival of Chinese music, Carnegie returned to its bread-and-butter business of presenting international orchestras in mostly standard repertory. But for listeners who found that prospect less exciting than further explorations of new music and exotica might have been, the hall offered a reminder of how thrilling its version of business as usual could be.

The first visitors to take the stage after the Ancient Paths, Modern Voices festival were Simon Rattle and the Berlin Philharmonic, who gave the first of three concerts built around the Brahms symphonies on Wednesday evening. Repertory doesn't get much more standard than Brahms. But Mr. Rattle and his orchestra have just released a recording of the four symphonies (on EMI Classics), so it makes sense to tour with them. And instead of filling out his three programs with more Brahms, Mr. Rattle has reached into the early 20th century to draw his companion pieces from among Schoenberg's orchestral works.

To get the series started, though, he found a work that put the composers on common ground: Brahms's ground, in truth, but with a hefty landscaping job by Schoenberg. Brahms completed the Piano Quartet No. 1 in G minor in 1861, and it has hardly been neglected in its original form. But in 1937 Schoenberg orchestrated it, fleshing out the string lines; spreading the keyboard writing among the woodwinds, strings, brasses and even percussion; and adding a whole new level of percussion that the original scarcely implied but that seems natural when this music is presented as a stealth symphony.

Rescored versions of well-known pieces are always dicey. It can be hard to banish the original sound and texture from your inner ear, however convincing the new interpretation may sound. But it can be worth the effort, as Mr. Rattle and his musicians demonstrated in a vital, shapely account that found levels of drama in Schoenberg's magnification that a performance of the chamber version could not possibly equal.

The performance said a lot about Schoenberg, too. In the early movements he kept close to Brahms's sound world, even hinting, in the magical touch of woodwind and percussion scoring that closed the second movement, at the orchestration of the Fourth Symphony's Allegro giocoso. But in the third and fourth movements Schoenberg began to pull free of Brahms's orbit, and in the closing Rondo alla Zingarese, his freehanded use of percussion had a modernist (or at least, decidedly post-Brahmsian) ring.

Mr. Rattle devoted the second half of the concert to a magnificently shaped, vividly played performance of the Symphony No. 1. Throughout the first movement Mr. Rattle kept the tensions that swirl around the score's C minor tonality in high relief, mainly by keeping the

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dynamics and balances fluid and pointing up this ensemble's distinctive timbres: its assertively tactile timpani sound, for example, or its rich bass and cello tone.

Thereafter, as Brahms pushed the work from its dark opening into the blazing light of its finale, Mr. Rattle lightened its hues, drawing a warm, polished string sound in the Andante sostenuto, irresistibly bittersweet wind coloration in the third movement and solid, beautifully tuned brass playing in the regal chorale that crowns the finale.

It would probably be too much to say that Mr. Rattle's performance was revelatory in a lightning bolt sort of way. But it approached the work with the kind of energy, clarity and thoughtfulness that reminds you what made it such a knockout the first time you heard it. And sometimes that's exactly what you need.

Simon Rattle's Brahms cycle ends on Friday at Carnegie Hall; (212) 247-7800, carnegiehall.org.

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