

Fresh air for Brahms

Mario Venzago conducts a complete recording of the symphonies

By Peter Hagmann

The stage that Switzerland offers its musicians is one that is audibly wooden and creaking. The composer, oboist and conductor Heinz Holliger chose instead to teach in Freiburg im Breisgau in Germany, and is active in all the world's main centres for classical music. His composing colleague Klaus Huber also moved to Germany (and to Italy). As for the representatives of the younger generation, we can mention the conductor Philippe Jordan, who has chosen Paris and Vienna as the two pillars of his career. And in the case of Mario Venzago, too – who celebrated his 70th birthday on 1 July – it's really only at a second glance that we associate him with Switzerland.

Venzago was born in Zurich, and in younger years worked in Winterthur and Lucerne until he was appointed General Music Director in Heidelberg and the Director of the German Chamber Philharmonic in Bremen. From there he moved to Graz and San Sebastian, then to Baltimore and Indianapolis, to Sweden, Finland and Britain. Nevertheless, he did enjoy several highly successful years in Switzerland as the Chief Conductor of the Basel Symphony Orchestra, and since 2010 he has had an equally brilliant impact on the Bern Symphony Orchestra. But it seems that Venzago isn't taken into consideration when it comes to conducting the leading orchestras of Zurich or Geneva, let alone when it comes to appointing someone to run them.

This is as typical as it is regrettable. As an artist, Mario Venzago eschews what is comfortable. He's an "interpreter" in the emphatic sense of the word. For proof of that, we just have to consider his involvement in the large-scale, scholarly project in Bern focusing on Othmar Schoeck's last opera, *Das Schloss Dürande* (1943), whose Nazi-inflected text was re-written in the process of creating a remarkable new version of the opera (see: "Mittwochs um zwölf" in this newspaper of 6 June 2018). Venzago did not shy away from intervening in Schoeck's score, just as he has also felt compelled to "finish" Franz Schubert's "Unfinished" Symphony – and just as he now intends to grapple with Schubert's opera *Fierrabras* with similar ambitions.

As an interpreter, Venzago doesn't follow the mainstream, and he has his own opinion about each individual case. That was already obvious in his complete set of the symphonies of Robert Schumann, which he recorded with the Basel Symphony Orchestra from 1999 to 2002. He achieved results that might rub one up the wrong way here and there, but that are considerably more interesting than the recording made slightly later by the Zurich Tonhalle Orchestra under its then chief conductor David Zinman. The same might be said of Venzago's interpretation of the symphonies by Anton Bruckner, which he recorded on CD for the label *cpo* between 2010 and 2014 with no less than five orchestras from very different countries. The manner in which he dealt with issues of sound and tempo did not just offer proof of this conductor's unconventional temperament, but also served to enliven discussions about how to perform Bruckner's symphonies.

And now Brahms. Mario Venzago had already worked with the Tapiola Sinfonietta from the Finnish city of Espoo when recording Bruckner's symphonies Nos. 0, 1 and 5. This orchestra,

founded in 1987, for whom Venzago has been an “artist in association” since 2010, has 41 permanent members. It thus corresponds to the size of the Meiningen Court Orchestra that was so highly regarded by Brahms, and that he himself conducted in the world première of his Fourth Symphony. And here we come to Venzago’s concern: to perform the symphonies (and the two serenades) of Johannes Brahms not with the instruments of their time, but in the spirit of their era. He brings the principles of historically informed performance practice quite naturally into the orchestra’s traditional performance context – and the results are exciting to listen to.

When you enter into Venzago’s mostly dark, heavy opening to the First Symphony, you will be surprised by the bright, airy sound in which the wind seem to have a different heft from usual. The contrabassoon, for example, can be heard straightaway, and adds charming tonal colour. And the strings don’t avoid vibrato, but employ it sparingly and in a purposeful manner. When the woodwind enter into a dialogue with the violas and the celli in the Andante of the Third Symphony, the sound colours have an impact of quite extraordinary dimensions. What’s more, the strings have been arranged after the German manner, with the first and second violins placed to the left and right of the conductor respectively. This benefits the highly contrapuntal substance of the music. In any event, it’s a wonderful experience, as if you are listening into the very interior of the musical texture. This is also thanks to the excellent work of the recording engineer Andreas Werner.

This recording as a whole is characterised by a relaxed vitality – which is also thanks to Venzago’s deliberate approach to articulation and phrasing. In the first movement of the Second Symphony, the triple metre becomes tangible time and again thanks to the clarity of how he places the beats. And in the lovingly played Andante of the Fourth Symphony, one is struck by how the *forte* is a result not just of the volume alone, but just as much by how Venzago judges the length of the individual notes and how they interact – in other words, it comes down to the articulation. He pays special attention to the tempi. They generally remain fluid and are modified less often than in other recordings by Venzago. Nevertheless, slight alterations to the basic tempo still enable him to emphasise individual gestures and moments of consolidation. Venzago adheres to the advice offered by Brahms to Fritz Steinbach, Court Capellmeister in Meiningen – remarks that were not published in the score, but have been handed down to us via a third party. Venzago follows them as discreetly as the modern-thinking conductors of the late 19th century would have wished. There is not a moment here that is not inspiring.

Johannes Brahms: The four symphonies, the two serenades. Tapiola Sinfonietta, Mario Venzago (conductor). Sony 119075853112 (3 CDs).