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A Visceral, Marathon Performance by the Orchestra of St. Luke's at Carnegie Hall

by delarue

There was electricity in the air Thursday night at Carnegie Hall, where a sold-out crowd witnessed conductor Pablo Heras-Casaldo (<http://pabloherascasado.com>) leading the Orchestra of St. Luke's (<https://www.oslmusic.org>) through a marathon performance of two symphonies, a famous piano concerto and a clever mini-suite that should be more popular than it is.

There's always a curmudgeon somewhere. "They're playing the Prokofiev *first*?" an older guy in the orchestra section scowled to his date, a pretty young brunette in a tight black sweater. "That's anticlimactic."

"That's daring," she deadpanned. Both turned out to be right.

From the quasi-Haydn of the exchanges in the opening movement of Prokofiev's Symphony No. 1, it sparkled with distinct voicings, jaunty accents and sotto-voce humor. It's not Bohemian Rhapsody, but parts of it are close: the composer clearly had a great time toying with short, punchy, late 18th century-style Germanic phrasing. The pseudo-Mozart of the third movement was the most irresistibly funny part, yet tellingly, Heras-Casaldo and the ensemble glimmered most memorably in the saturnine second movement. That's where Prokofiev leaves no doubt as to who wrote it – and that bittersweetness will prevail at least for the time being. The coda seemed a little fast; then again, it's hard to argue with how much fun the group were having, running red lights all the way.

Pianist Hélène Grimaud (<http://helenegrimaud.com>) earned several standing ovations for a breathtakingly visceral take of Ravel's Piano Concerto in G. From its gleeful opening glissandos, through plenty of the ravishing bolero and flamenco-tinged phrasing that the composer loved so much, to the sharply polished, steely interweave of the third movement, she matched meticulous precision to mighty joie de vivre.

It was going to be hard to top that. By now, it was all the more impressive how seamlessly the orchestra had negotiated a rugged road, constantly shifting gears between the early classical period, Russian Romanticism, the early modern, and foreshadowing flickers of flamenco jazz. There would

be even more new terrain in Stravinsky's Suite No. 1 for Small Orchestra, a whistle-stop tour of tarantella, flamenco and finally Russian folk influences fleshed out with an arrangement that's carnivalesque if not completely phantasmagorical.

They closed with an old warhorse, Haydn's Symphony No. 103 in E Flat, from 1795. Once again, Heras-Casaldo and the group seemed to be having a ball with the endless volleys of call-and-response from both individual voices and segments of the orchestra. In the same vein as their rendition of the Prokofiev, this turned out to be more boisterous and beery than – as the curmudgeon groused to his companion – simply banquet music for the landed gentry of Napoleonic Europe.

The Orchestra of St. Luke's next show is April 25 at 8 PM at New York City Center, joining soprano Victoria Clark (<https://victoriack.me>) in a performance of Kurt Weill's Lady in the Dark; \$30 tix are available.

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