

STANDPOINT.

BLOG entry

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A Spot of Brahms in the Balkans

by Jessica Duchen

It's been a dizzying time, this Balkan tour. Sorry for lack of reports on the road, but I spent every spare moment catching up on sleep, which was in short supply. And I didn't even have to play an instrument. I don't know how they do it.



Istanbul, Skopje & Sofia LPO tour Dec 10 033

Istanbul: one of the world's greatest cities, the sort of beauty that you can barely imagine in the grey old suburbs of Blighty. We met up with my friend Serhan Bali, Turkey's music journalist mover and shaker par excellence, founder of the country's chief classical music magazine, *Andante*, with whom we enjoyed a long walk across town, past the Hagia Sophia, the gardens of Topkapi Palace and the old Orient Express train station, along the way taking in the strange instance of Maria Callas's piano, which is housed in the cafe of an art gallery. Later we drove along the Bosphorus and enjoyed a sunset coffee by the water's edge. This was definitely not cold Turkey - 17 degrees and blazing sunshine... Serhan has loaded me up with a heap of CDs of Turkish composers and performers and we'll be hearing more from him very soon about the country's classical music scene. Istanbul has an international festival in June which I am promised will feature a stunning programme with some familiar musical faces...



Istanbul, Skopje & Sofia LPO tour Dec 10 034

The LPO and Vladimir Jurowski gave their Turkish concert in a modern complex owned by a leading bank: a hall that if you took out the carpet and raised the ceiling by a few metres might be quite good, but is currently rather on the dry side acoustically. Huseyin Sermet, one of Turkey's leading concert pianists who remains scandalously under-recognised in Britain -- having made his South Bank debut only this year -- performed Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto with refulgent tone that matched the mystical transparency of the music to perfection (sadly he had a memory lapse in the last movement, but this can happen to anyone). Mendelssohn's 'Reformation' Symphony pulled its weight as the opener.

Happiness, though, is taking in Brahms's Third Symphony three times in four days. If I had to name an all-time favourite symphony, it would be this one. Perhaps that is partly because it is in some ways so

very unlike a symphony. I often 'orchestrate' piano music in my head while listening to it or playing it, but it is rare conversely to imagine an orchestral work transferring to the keyboard or a chamber ensemble. The central two movements of this intimate, note-perfect creation (not a sound too many or too few) could easily have been drawn from Brahms's late piano intermezzi: tender thoughts suspended in the complex emotional borderlands between major and minor. Listening to the rehearsal in Skopje, I was struck by a wonderful image that Vladimir evoked for the opening of the second movement, in which a folksong-like theme on the clarinets is echoed by the cellos. Imagine the woodwind as the children; the cellos are the grandparents, singing the same song yet with their own gravitas.

And so to Macedonia, where the concert was a seriously big deal. This was the first time a British orchestra has visited Skopje. The president, prime minister and culture minister were all present, and local hero Simon Trpceski had bust a gut to make sure the concert took place. Simon is a dazzling individual at the best of times, a down-to-earth, roll-up-your-sleeves-and-get-on-with-it sort: but put him at a piano and the music takes off and flies and loops the loop. His Prokofiev Third was an all-singing, all-dancing affair, full of Prokofiev's glittering midwinter magic. This concerto's effect depends intensely on the pianist, I fear. It can sound hackneyed and staccato. Or it can sound like a refugee chunk of the composer's finest ballet music, suitably bedecked in crystal and velvet. Bingo. Simon's was the best I've heard since Martha Argerich.



Istanbul, Skopje & Sofia LPO tour Dec 10 058

There is never a good time for a city to experience an earthquake that knocks down 80 per cent of its buildings, but 1963 was a particularly unfortunate moment for this small then-Communist capital to have to be rebuilt. There's a charming old town across the Stone Bridge, and you can walk up to the

ruins of the castle for a view clean across the top of the city to the hills beyond. Apart from this, instances of architectural beauty are mostly subsumed within concrete horrors and crumbling apartment blocks; but now the city is full of cranes, busily erecting, amongst many other creations, a brand-new concert hall that is slated to open in 2012. The LPO concert took place in an arena normally used for trade fairs, but transformed by 2500 seats (all sold), an enthusiastic audience (plus tight security for the dignitaries) and what looked like a thousand flowers around the stage.



Istanbul, Skopje & Sofia LPO tour Dec 10 081

Skopje too is transforming, and given its setting amid rolling mountains and open sky plus a climate that is apparently sunny 300 days of the year, it seems set to move on to great things. I hold Simon largely responsible for putting the place firmly onto the musical map: he's the piano Dudamel of Macedonia, a figurehead whose terrific energy makes others believe in his dreams as strongly as he does. More power to his elbows!

Surprise fact of the day: Mother Teresa was born in Skopje.

And so on to Bulgaria, but with a flight in on Saturday morning, a hotel on the Balkan equivalent of the outer reaches of the A40 and a general sense of much Cyrillic, much concrete and lingering effects from the Communist era, we regrettably did not see very much of Sofia. Here the hall - the National Palace of Culture - seated 4000 and Helene Grimaud arrived to play Beethoven 4.

Chief foot-in-mouth moment of tour: HG - "Jess, how did you enjoy Skopje?" JD - "It was great, I bought this wonderful fur hat..."

And this was the concert in which the Brahms flowered most of all and burst unforgettably into bloom - even more than the stage decor in Skopje. More flowers at the end, when Vladimir, handed a bouquet on stage, walked over to give it to Mila, the Bulgarian second violin whose parents were in proud attendance.

I'll post a link to more photos shortly. Gotta dash, am lunching later with the great-niece of...but more of that another time.



Istanbul, Skopje & Sofia LPO tour Dec 10 050