

**LUCERNE
FESTIVAL**

HISTORIC
PERFORMANCES

audite



Rafael Kubelík

Haydn Symphony No. 99

Schoenberg Piano Concerto

Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 4

John Ogdon | New Philharmonia Orchestra

Joseph Haydn (1732–1809)
Symphony No. 99 in E-Flat Major, Hob. I:99

- I. *Adagio – Vivace assai* 6:49
- II. *Adagio* 6:19
- III. *Menuett. Allegretto – Trio* 6:05
- IV. *Finale. Vivace* 4:36

Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951)
Piano Concerto, Op. 42

- I. *Andante* 4:22
- II. *Molto allegro* 2:47
- III. *Adagio* 5:24
- IV. *Giocosio (moderato)* 5:43

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893)
Symphony No. 4 in F Minor, Op. 36

- I. *Andante sostenuto – Moderato con anima* 18:09
- II. *Andantino in modo di canzone* 9:26
- III. *Scherzo. Pizzicato ostinato – Allegro* 5:15
- IV. *Finale. Allegro con fuoco* 9:32

John Ogdon piano
New Philharmonia Orchestra
Rafael Kubelík

recorded live at Lucerne Festival
(Internationale Musikfestwochen Luzern)







The path of greatest resistance

1968: Rafael Kubelík in Lucerne

“I believe that music and art in general only have a justification if they strive to make us better humans,” Rafael Kubelík confessed, in both simple and irrevocable terms. “I, at least, strive for this and believe that every composer should. Because without this ethical justification, art would remain just a witty game.” This is debatable, for what is good, let alone better, is not something on which a churchgoer, an economic liberal or a feminist will necessarily agree. But the Czech conductor and composer was completely sincere in his confession. He had been living in exile for twenty years when the socialist reform movement in Prague was brutally crushed by the tanks of the Warsaw Pact in 1968, resulting in many dead, injured, persecuted or imprisoned: the bloody end of the brief “Prague Spring” coincided exactly with the summer of the Internationale Musikfestwochen (today’s Lucerne Festival), held in Lucerne, Rafael Kubelík’s adopted home, since 1938.

The Czech émigré called for a boycott, for the severance of artistic relations: his intended ban was directed against an illegitimate regime in Prague, against the Soviet occupiers and their willing helpers from the communist brother states. And Kubelík was pleased to have prominent comrades-in-arms: the two Claudios, Arrau and Abbado, Daniel Barenboim and Sir John Barbirolli, Arthur Rubinstein, Friedrich Gulda, Bernard Haitink, Kubelík’s compatriot Rudolf Firkušný, Isaac Stern, Yehudi Menuhin, Sir Georg Solti and Igor Stravinsky signed the appeal.

At the beginning of September, Kubelík gave a guest performance at the Edinburgh Festival with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, whose principal conductor he had been since 1961. He then returned to Lucerne to conduct the closing concert of the Musikfestwochen on 8 September 1968. Just before this performance, he had established the “Foundation for Czechoslovak Émigrés after 21 August 1968”, which is why on that evening in the old Lucerne Kunsthau there was an “Appeal to our Visitors” on every seat, with a request for support and thanks for donations. Several attendees, however, regretted that no work by a Czech composer had been included in the programme, even at short notice. On the other hand, rumours circulated that the Czechoslovak national anthems were to be played. If such a symbolic political act was actually planned, it failed to materialise. Rafael Kubelík was not a “nationalist” after all.

Under this fighting term – and in the intensified version of “bourgeois nationalist” – in 1953 Kubelík had been criticised in his lost homeland and,



on top of that, had been convicted in criminal proceedings (“in absentia”) for an unauthorised sojourn abroad. Kubelík’s reaction to the perfidious insinuations that he had betrayed his country was understandably thin-skinned, but imperturbable. “I left my fatherland so as not to have to leave my people,” he countered. And, with less pathos: “I left so that I would not be obliged to participate in the dismantling of our culture and humanity.” He was born one day after the Sarajevo assassination, on 29 June 1914, not far from Prague, the son of the violinist Jan Kubelík, the much-praised “Paganini redivivus”, and Marianne Csáky-Széll, a Hungarian countess who was enlightened by religion and mysticism. At the tender age of nineteen, Rafael Kubelík made his debut with the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra (included in the programme was Tchaikovsky’s Fourth Symphony!), who then went on to appoint him their permanent conductor in 1936 and their artistic director in 1941, succeeding Václav Talich. A stellar career – but he lived on a razor-edge.

In 1939, the Germans had occupied his country and by force established the “Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia”. Kubelík practised passive resistance: he conducted Czech composers, also including Haydn, but under no circumstances Wagner. He refused the “Hitler salute”. In 1944 he opted for illegality and went into hiding in the countryside, far from Prague. However, the hope held by Kubelík and most of his compatriots for relief after the Second World War did not come true. On the contrary, Czechoslovakia became a Socialist Republic under the guardianship of the Soviet Union.

In 1948, Rafael Kubelík performed Smetana’s *Má vlast* for the last time with the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra before emigrating a few days later. As if in historical mirror symmetry, he performed the same piece with the same orchestra when he returned to Prague in 1990. In other words, Kubelík spent 42 years, more than half of his life, in exile. “I was always with you in spirit,” he assured the orchestra after his late return home. When the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra gave three performances at the Musikfestwochen in the summer of 1969, Kubelík invited the orchestra to a reception at his home on Lake Lucerne, presenting each of the players with a “freedom memorial medal” which he had donated himself. However, the musicians were obliged to return the “provocative” gift immediately after their departure from Lucerne.

“How sweet a certain freedom tastes”, Joseph Haydn remarked, who after decades as Kapellmeister in the service of the Esterházy princes was finally able to free himself of the rigid courtly regulations, and travel to London,



where his performances were met with much acclaim. For his concerts in the British capital, Haydn composed a total of twelve symphonies, including the Symphony in E flat major, Hob. I:99, which he premiered in 1794. In September 1968, the Philharmonia Orchestra, re-named the New Philharmonia Orchestra following secession and re-establishment, travelled from London to Lucerne for a residency, playing one concert each with Claudio Abbado, Otto Klemperer (their “Honorary President”), and Rafael Kubelík, who opened his performance with Haydn’s Symphony No. 99.

In the years that followed, London became the centre of “historically informed performance”, and especially of the Haydn renaissance; ensembles at the forefront of this movement included The English Concert, the Academy of Ancient Music and the London Classical Players. The Haydn playing of the New Philharmonia Orchestra remained unaffected for the time being – or did it? After all, it was Haydn’s British contemporaries, i.e. his original audience, who, in stark contrast to the trivialising “Papa Haydn” myths perpetuated during the nineteenth century, had admired precisely the grandeur, sublimity and majesty of his symphonies. And the Lucerne performance does not lack grandeur, monumentality, powerful sound and drama, including outbursts and abysses. In all four movements, the tendency to slow down, to enlarge, to “rest in motion”, and also to move towards the “molto sostenuto” ideal, which determined a generally “Wagnerised” orchestral culture at the time, prevails. Whilst humour, tempo, quick-wittedness and contrasts do not fall by the way-side, they are translated into a different mentality, a different pulse. This Haydn sounds distant and foreign; however, these interpretations certainly leave their own mark. In any case, there is never one truth in music; truths are pluralistic. This is the distinguishing feature between music and the dictatorships under which Rafael Kubelík did not want to live.

The fact that Tchaikovsky’s Fourth, the work of a Russian composer, represented the main element of the programme, only a few days after the “Russian” invasion of Prague, caused a certain stir and was discussed in the newspapers. However, it was also defended and justified. “Kubelik championed the Tchaikovsky symphony as if it were a declaration of the victory of the spirit, of freedom over all the forces of fate. Who would not have thought of such parallels to the current events in Czechoslovakia?”, asked one critic.

The furore of this performance does indeed transcend the boundaries of the concert (and the concert hall): from the shattering opening which, like



the trumpets of Jericho, could bring down walls, to the end of the symphony, which burns up in sheer fury. “For me it is important to bring something new from the podium every evening,” Kubelík emphasised, “to tear myself to pieces – to give something every time, not to take. Taking is not worthy of a musician at all.” In his interpretation of the Fourth Symphony, however, Kubelík does not merely reveal the music’s romantic rift, its self-mangling, so to speak. Rather, he depicts a social panorama by having the most diverse characters appear as if on a stage, simultaneously playing the imaginary scene, meeting or avoiding each other. The often strikingly abrupt changes in tone and tempo underline this dramatic suggestion, especially as Kubelík creates distinctly theatrical contrasts when the wind instruments seem to be playing a completely different piece to the strings. In this perfectly plausible reading, Tchaikovsky’s symphony becomes a mirror of societal realities. This is not about folk scenes or national romanticism, but about people talking at cross purposes. And it is about the brutality that lurks in all social actions. In this respect, Tchaikovsky’s Fourth was indeed a suitable pairing with the central work of the evening, Arnold Schoenberg’s Piano Concerto, even if some reviewers claimed the opposite (and there were also expressions of displeasure in the festival’s programme committee).

Music from exile. “Life was so easy / Suddenly hatred broke out / A serious situation arose / But life goes on.” In laconic lines, Schoenberg paraphrased the inner programme of his concerto, which he composed in 1942 at his Californian refuge in Brentwood Park, West Los Angeles. He had left Germany immediately in 1933, without any illusion as to forthcoming events. “One might expect that, now in a new world, I am amply compensated by the comforts it offers me for the loss for which I have prepared myself for more than a decade. I have certainly separated from the old world, not without having felt it in my bones, for I was not prepared for it to leave me both homeless and speechless.” But the language which he had not lost remained connected to the “old” European world, to fin de siècle Vienna and the Berlin of the 1920s – to the recent past which had once represented the future, the promise of happiness of modernity, progress, freedom, which tasted all the more bitter in exile.

Schoenberg’s Piano Concerto was performed for the first (but not the last) time at the Musikfestwochen in 1968. In contrast, the English pianist John Ogdon performed only this one single time in Lucerne. “In the late 1960s the name John Ogdon was as famous in the world of British classical music as the Beatles were in the realm of popular music,” wrote his



biographer Charles Beauclerk. Ogdon, who was 31 years old at the time, represented a paradoxical phenomenon: on the one hand, he won the Moscow Tchaikovsky Competition as an extreme virtuoso; on the other hand, as a composer, he belonged, alongside Harrison Birtwistle and Peter Maxwell Davies, to the avant-garde group “New Music Manchester”. Ogdon mastered an almost fantastical, incredibly demanding repertoire that included the piano works of Carl Nielsen, the sonatas of Scriabin, Messiaen’s *Vingt regards sur l’enfant-Jésus*, Alkan’s *Concerto pour piano seul* and Sorabji’s *Opus clavicembalisticum*, but also piano transcriptions from Palestrina to Cole Porter.

In his home country, Ogdon, who died in 1989, is still praised as “the greatest British pianist of all time”, and the BBC even made a film about his life, although the biographical curiosity was not just motivated by music but also stems from the artist’s long struggle with mental crises (from 1973) and his stays in psychiatric hospitals. Ogdon played the Schoenberg Piano Concerto in Lucerne with textual precision and comprehensibility, with great immediacy and unparalleled authority, an unerring sense for the abruptly changing characters of this music and its ongoing variational processes, with luminous, iridescent chords, but also the necessary hardness and “paw” to which Kubelík challenged him. The conductor interpreted this concerto as an expression and testimony of the human and historical catastrophe, which he emphasised, presenting the piece as a lurid, realistic, shocking work of war and the flight from the mortal enemies.

However, Rafael Kubelík, who had conducted the posthumous premiere of the oratorio *Die Jakobsleiter* in Vienna in 1961, was already an unflinching advocate of Arnold Schoenberg’s music. In the early 1950s, during his tenure as Music Director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, this attitude led to an early break: “How can you love Bach or Beethoven if you don’t know Hindemith or Schoenberg?”, he asked. “The audience, or rather, our society, has a right to hear what music has emerged or is emerging from it.” Rafael Kubelík was one of the few truly independent musicians, according to Daniel Barenboim, who admired the great colleague equally as an artist and as a person. “He chose a path without any artistic compromise, the path of the greatest rather than of the least resistance.”

Wolfgang Stähr
Translation: Viola Scheffel

LUCERNE FESTIVAL

recording: live recording at Lucerne Festival
(Internationale Musikfestwochen Luzern)



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