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Church of St. Pius makes impressive debut as concert venue

Rapturous reception for horn player Roland Horvath, pianist Johanna Horny-Neumann and organist Hans-Gunter Leuchter

Würselen. “Pius am Mittwoch” hosted top artists Roland Horvath, a horn player with the Vienna Philharmonic for many years, and pianist Johanna Horny-Neumann. Both travelled from the Austrian capital at the invitation of Hans-Gunter Leuchter, the driving force behind the concert series, to perform a concert in celebration of the remodelling and renovation of the Church of St. Pius X.

Leuchter was very happy to be able to welcome these “dear friends” to his home town.

The audience in the packed church was treated to a concert of the highest quality in a wonderful atmosphere, as the visitors from Vienna fully lived up to their reputations as masters of their art and their instruments. The church also impressed on its debut as a concert space, with noticeably improved acoustics.

Hans-Gunter Leuchter’s recital of Voluntary No. 8 in D minor by the English composer John Stanley allowed the small but impressive five-register Klais organ to take the limelight, following its integration into the church space as part of the remodelling. Leuchter also made full use of the organ’s tonal range for Italian composer Domenico Zipoli’s Sonate d’intavolatura in C major, proving his ample credentials as an organist.

Accomplished horn player Roland Horvath, who provided entertaining introductions to the works and composers in a charming Viennese accent, gave the audience a first taste of his virtuoso skill with a performance of Alessandro Stradella’s Air d’Eglise, for which he was ably accompanied by the pianist.

After the horn and piano duet, it was time for horn and organ. The two instruments combined with perfect subtlety in a rendition of the Largo from George Frideric Handel’s opera Serse (Xerxes). Beautiful music filled the church, followed by thunderous applause from the rapt audience. There was no question that the combination of horn and organ was just as appealing as horn and piano – if, as Horvath pointed out, you could compare the duets at all, especially in view of the two very different compositions that were presented.

A solo performer extraordinaire, Johanna Horny-Neumann enchanted everyone present with her recital of Un sospiro by Franz Liszt. Horny-Neumann taught at the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz before moving to the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna, where she works today. Her dexterity was certainly called upon for the breathtaking runs in this dazzling piece. The pianist also left no one in doubt of her mastery of music from further east, with impressive recitals of Russian composer Alexander Scriabin’s Nocturne Op. 9 No. 2 and Sayed Darwish’s Melody Op. 25 No. 1. Schubert’s Ave Maria provided a stark contrast to the piece by Liszt, and it was all the more moving for its more sparing use of notes. The piano and horn conjured up an untouched idyll with their performance of Morgentraum im Walde by Anton Wunderer, a composer known by only a few experts.

The piece delivered a dash of romanticism in a varied programme that allowed the combinations of the horn with both the piano and organ to shine further in renditions of Charles Gounod’s Ave Maria and Romance No.2 in G minor by Johann Strauss – works from two different musical periods. En Prière by French composer Gabriel Fauré, arranged for horn and piano, and the Concerto in Judas Maccabaeus by Handel, an organ solo played by Hans-Gunter Leuchter, rounded out the programme perfectly.

Songs and pictures: Winterreise

Fans of “Pius am Mittwoch” can look forward to another musical treat on 28 October in the form of Schubert’s Winterreise song cycle, which will be performed by Rslan Aliyev (baritone), accompanied on the piano by Hans-Gunter Leuchter. An exhibition of paintings entitled Winterreise by Elvira Schalla will also open on the same evening.

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Roland Horvath (horn), Johanna Horny-Neumann (piano) and Hans-Gunter Leuchter (organ) enjoy well-deserved applause.

Photo: Wolfgang Sevenich