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CLASSICAL REVIEW: Haitink, Perahia pair for Beethoven's Fourth

Conductor emeritus of the Boston Symphony Orchestra Bernard Haitink and pianist Murray Perahia sounded like they were having an intelligent conversation, agreeing and challenging each other by turns, never losing control.

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Conductor Bernard Haitink and pianist Murray Perahia perform the music of Beethoven... [+]

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Conductor Bernard Haitink and pianist Murray Perahia perform the music of Beethoven...

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By Keith Powers

For The Patriot Ledger

Posted Apr. 1, 2016 at 3:11 pm

Updated Apr 1, 2016 at 3:22 PM

The longer we see Bernard Haitink, the better it gets.

The revered conductor emeritus of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, in town this weekend to mark his 45th season with the orchestra, led the ensemble Thursday evening at Symphony Hall in a program that at first blush seemed like more of the

same old thing.

Beethoven and Mahler are hardly strangers on BSO programs these days. But their music is around more than a century after it was written, and there are reasons.

Haitink showed us what they are.

He had help. Joined by Murray Perahia for Beethoven's Fourth piano concerto, the two phrased the concerto in confident and elegant ways, making musical statements time and again with articulate clarity.

It started out with some rough patches. The unusual first movement – the piano begins with a tender phrase, and the orchestra repeats it, equally tender, a rare opening gambit – had some balance issues. Perahia dominated the sound, drowning out orchestral accompaniment at times. Doubled rhythms sounded askew.

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But the phrasing. Haitink and Perahia sounded like they were having an intelligent conversation, agreeing and challenging each other by turns, never losing control. The middle movement flowed calmly. One section, with impossible trills in the right hand, the left crossing over and back to carve out ideas, was fingered with staggering accuracy.

Throughout the aggressive finale, give-and-take reached its height. Even though Perahia came out of the final cadenza with far too much force, perhaps misidentifying a chord or two, the moment belonged to these two masters.

We live in a world full of Mahler, but it wasn't always so. Haitink himself once said, "When I was young and started playing Mahler in London, the halls were half empty." Americans correctly credit Leonard Bernstein for reviving his gigantic symphonies in the 1950s, but it was left to a generation of practitioners that followed, with Haitink in the lead, to polish the performances.





Mahler's first symphony may be the most accessible, coming to us in its final form with the traditional four movements, no vocalists, only the packed stage (at least 100 musicians) hinting at the expanse of his succeeding symphonies.





And Haitink made it even more accessible. Most times the enormous sonic forces onstage (and offstage) were molded into chamber music, intimate and small. The opening movement – a pastorale with repeated cuckoo calls, the winds dominating the melodies, the strings pulling long, mellow atmospheres, and the horns interjecting fanfares – swept along like a spring hike.

The layers of the second movement, a waltz-like dance form (the Ländler) familiar to Mahler's audiences, came out under Haitink's baton like chorale.

The third movement, a march, brings an unusual melody, know to us as "Frère Jacques." Mahler knew it as "Bruder Martin," but he transforms it in a minor key with dirge-like energy. Carved out beautifully in principal bass Edwin Barker's solo, the movement continues the lugubrious energy of the march, but colors it as well with burlesque flavors.

The stormy finale, recalling all the melodies from previous movements, some in altered, almost disfigured form, grapples to reach some joy. When it does, the horns standing at the back of the stage for maximum volume, the audience feels it. With heightened understanding of each phrase, and complete concentration, Haitink showed us how.

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BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA Beethoven and Mahler. Bernard Haitink, conductor. Murray Perahia, piano. Thursday night and again Friday through Saturday and April 5 at Symphony Hall, 301 Massachusetts Ave., Boston; \$33-\$119. bso.org or 888-266-1200.

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