

A DIALOGUE BETWEEN DIFFERENT WORLDS AND EPOCHS

BY ELISA RUMICI

The concert on 27th September 2023 marked the beginning of the collaboration between pianist Marie-Ange Nguci, the 'Artist in Residence' for this season, and the Sinfonieorchester Basel, conducted by Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla. The program was particularly interesting, featuring two significant masterpieces of piano and orchestral repertoire: Ludwig van Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4, op. 58, and Jean Sibelius' *Lemminkäinen-Suite*, op. 22.

Among Beethoven's five concertos, the fourth is notably the most experimental and complex one, due to its intimate and lyrical qualities and the use of the high register that makes it more difficult for the piano to sing. Simultaneously, the relationship between the soloist and the orchestra is dense and intertwined, resembling a chamber-like dialogue, demanding profound connection and flexibility. From the piano's first, delicate entry at the beginning of the *Allegro Moderato*, Marie-Ange Nguci demonstrated exceptional control and sound quality. This introduction is considered one of the most challenging in the piano concerto repertoire, as remarked by the renowned pianist Arthur Schnabel, according to whom «after the delicate first five beats, the pianists have a minute of orchestral exposition time to ponder how badly they had already played». The rest of the first movement unfolded with tremendous virtuosity, striking a delicate balance that required the orchestra to flexibly adapt to the ever-changing character of the solo interventions.

The second movement, simpler in its entirety, was marked by an intense dramaturgy that vividly portrayed the strong contrast between the orchestra's staccato and fortissimo theme in E minor and the piano's cantabile, imploringly sweet melody. These contrasting thematic elements alternated, first with a broad breath, then in small fragments, with one gradually fading away while the other strengthened its voice, culminating in an intense chant and a bold tonally ambivalent cadenza. According to tradition, this *Andante con moto* is inspired by the myth of Orpheus subduing the forces of Hades with the beauty of his chant, pleading for Euridice's return to the world of the living. The third movement unfolded with vivacity and brilliant virtuosity, from the brief orchestral introduction to the incisive and rhythmic cadenza. The movement concluded with a dazzling coda, leading to enthusiastic applause from the audience.

In the second part of the concert, Sibelius' *Lemminkäinen-Suite* was performed. This suite consists of four tone poems for orchestra inspired by the *Kalevala*, a collection of folkloric, mythic, epic poetry. Due to time constraints, the program included only the first two movements (*Lemminkäinen and the Maidens of the Island* and *The Swan of Tuonela*) and the fourth one (*Lemminkäinen's Return*), omitting the third. This decision was deemed successful, considering the lengthy duration of the piece and the intensity of the first part of the concert. The composition was a blend of references to traditional Finnish folklore, sounds of nature, and romantic lyricism, captivating the audience. The orchestra excelled during the performance, conveying the melodic richness that characterizes the music of the celebrated Finnish composer. There was a subtle connection between the second movement of Beethoven's Fourth Concerto and the second piece of Sibelius' *Lemminkäinen-Suite*, both set in the realm of the dead, creating a highly evocative dialogue between these masterpieces of the concert repertoire.