

MUSIC: KUBELIK GIVES ORCHESTRA LEEWAY

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ANDRE PREVIN having dropped out of his engagement because of an onset of conductor's elbow, the duty and pleasure of leading the New York Philharmonic fell last night to Rafael Kubelik, an old friend of the orchestra. Whatever pain might come to the Czechoslovak conductor in this life, he is unlikely to feel it in the elbow. His baton work depends more on other parts of the anatomy, such as the shoulder and the lower back. He is not the most precise of technicians, but what he does seems to work for him. He pushes his left palm insistently at the musicians as if asking for a palm-reading, he appears to wave at a friend in the brass section, he holds his arms out imploring like St. Francis welcoming the birds, and he trembles in every bone and fiber.

And, of course, the Philharmonic by now understands what all this means and plays well for Mr. Kubelik. He does not seem to subdivide the beat in any helpful way, and his cues are subliminal. However, he sets convincing tempos and gives the musicians plenty of leeway to do their best. In Haydn's "Surprise" Symphony, which began the program, he made it clear he did not want any part of the kind of "Surprise" we sometimes hear nowadays, in which this familiar old symphony is refined so much that its nickname becomes a puzzle. Mr. Kubelik called for exaggerated dynamics in the Andante, emphasizing the sleepy beginning and then letting the timpani bang away and wake the half-dead. This is surely the right approach, and just because the audience enjoys it so much does not make it artistically reprehensible.

Mr. Kubelik did not push or force at any time. He took a warmer and more relaxed approach to Haydn than we sometimes hear, but why not? He has a feeling for the genial manner that Haydn exudes in such works as this, and he made the performance seem as natural as nodding to a friend. The Philharmonic caught the rustic mood from the first but also played with more precision than Mr. Kubelik appeared to demand of it.

Precision if anything is required of both orchestra and soloist in Stravinsky's Violin Concerto in D, which brought on Kyung-Wha Chung to take the rhythmically tricky fiddle part. Miss Chung, a dynamo in flame red, tore into the concerto with exceptional gusto, exhibiting total mastery of the quirky staccato passages in the first and last movements as well as the limping lyricism of the slower pages. There is not a lot of interpreting to do in Stravinsky's concertos, because he was at such pains to spell out every performance detail, but Miss Chung and Mr. Kubelik managed to pump blood into the work's veins.

The violinist was wonderfully alert to the byplay between her instrument and the orchestral soloists, often letting the violin take off on a brass flourish, say, and ride it into her next phrase. Mr. Kubelik's accompaniment was not at all lean in Stravinsky's own conducting style, and might have been slimmed down somewhat to the advantage of the soloist. However, if he did not seem as temperamentally in tune with the Stravinsky score as with the Haydn symphony or the Mendelssohn "Italian" that closed the program, he nonetheless provided close and sympathetic support.

The Mendelssohn brought the conductor and the orchestra back to safe ground. Here, Mr. Kubelik reverted to his natural style, establishing a good tempo and letting the orchestra have its head. The result was not by any means delicate or supremely graceful Mendelssohn, if that was what you wanted. However, the performance was shrewdly paced and ebullient without losing its ensemble finish; in other words, just what the "Italian" Symphony needs to succeed with an audience.