

**25. August 2008**

von Tobias Fischer

## **Concert Report: Lev Vinocour**

Live at the Schloss vor Husum, August 21st 2008.

The „Schloss vor Husum“ („Castle of Husum“), where tonight's concert is to take place, is situated right in the heart of the old city. Its location is so utterly central, in fact, that most people don't even seem to notice it any more. When I ask one of the „Hotel Osterkrug“'s friendly receptionists for directions, she hasn't even heard there is such a thing as a castle in the first place. It seems improbable, but as I walk towards the venue through a fine sheet of rain and the approaching dusk, I come to understand her position: Husum is like an ancient pearl on a geographical necklace of small towns strung out across the shore of the Baltic Sea. Its ancient city centre still looks almost exactly the way it did hundreds of years ago – barring the occasional Kebab or supermarket, of course – and with the splendour of ages humbly shining down on you, every house here could be a castle.

I enter the narrow „Schlossgang“, passing bookstores filled with works by Theodor Storm (the famous German writer who spent his entire life in and around Husum, which he, in a twist of bizarre affection, called „the grey city by the sea“) and listen to my shoes making tapdancing clicks on the uneven cobblestone path, I cross the street to arrive at the castle's parc-like garden. My steps are increasing their speed now, as several delays on my way to Husum have caused me to arrive only just in time. I rush up to the court, heading for the entrance, a small opened mouth at the chin of a regal red-bricked tower.

This homely fortress, then, is host to one of Germany's more adventurous Piano festivals. Simply entitled „Raritäten der Klaviermusik“ („Rarities of the Piano Repertoire“), its focus lies on presenting accessible yet seldomly performed pieces in an inspiringly classic environment. By eschewing the downtrodden paths of programming, these concerts allow listeners to really immerse themselves in both the music and the time it was derived from. With concerts held in front of intimate crowds of about 150 people, it is almost as if the illustrious line-up of artists (including Marc-Andre Hamelin and Daniel Berman) is performing just for you – a decidedly positive take on the new millenium's magic word „customisation“.

Consequently, the „concert hall“ feels more like an oversized living room at the time of the mediaeval German kings. A Steinway is placed beside a long panel of windows offering a panoramic view on the darkening garden with its wall of whispering willows. The audience is a conspirative community in its own right, guests nodding to each other from afar or striking up a confiding conversation with their neighbour. When Lev Vinocour virtually comes running towards the podium in strident steps, his flamboyant dinner jacket billowing in the self-created airstream, and theatrically salutes his admirers, it is truly as if one had been timemachined into a 19th century salon.

Vinocour is the perfect host for such an occasion. He is buoyant, passionate, humorous, sarcastic in a smart kind of way, intellectually sharp and charming, a man to whom „entertainment“ and „education“ are not to be seen as contradictions. These two terms have by no means been chosen for their alliterational value alone: This man really wants to „educate“ his audiences, he wants them to know about the pieces he likes, loves and lives with and will do everything to make them marvel at them

in the same way he does. His interpretations, as will become clear in just a few minutes, are lucid, yet his mind works in undecipherably imaginative ways.

Regularly, Vinocour's actions are impulsive: His program tonight is based on pieces with strong connections to the world of visual arts and just this morning, probably over coffee, he thought it a good idea to illustrate the point by printing out the accompanying images at a local copy shop. As a result of this spontaneity, the pictures have turned out too small for the back rows to discern and slightly too dark for the front rows to fully appreciate. When you're seated at the side, as I am, it doesn't really matter anyway, because the Pianist, captivated by the intense colours and psychoactive suggestiveness of the images he has brought along, simply forgets to turn left or right and you can't see a thing.

With someone else, this would have been a faux-pas. With Vinocour, however, it only makes him more sympathetic. Such is his own enthusiasm for the accompanying anecdotes and stories that you can't help but laugh along and follow his every word even when his verbal quickfire rhythms approach the point of incomprehensibility. And there can be no doubt that the music benefits from his detailed accounts and background reports. Historical dates, names, places and events come gushing out of his mouth as if shooting down a chute— even if it were all made up, the passion of his delivery renders it admirable. Next season, he will present a unique program of Piano pieces and lectures on religion, chemistry and other earthly phenomena in Düsseldorf and the theoretical madness of the idea is transformed into a mouthwateringly promising practical proposition as he juggles and dances with words on the small stage. After finishing his explanations on Borowsky's transcription of Debussy's „Prelude a l'apres-midi d'un faune“, Vinocour sits down and begins playing instantly. There is no transition between his verbal presentation and his musical expressions at all, he is in a zone of full concentration now and only a break to catch his breath could disturb him. As I learn from one of the organisers afterwards, he has been working on his upcoming album on RCA Red Seal well into the late hours of the night before and appears to be in a sort of trance. It has certainly only served to invigorate his spirits. The „Faune“ is moody and dark, erotic and enigmatic. Vinocour allows his fine webs of harmonics and twisted harmonies to linger in the room like the scent of an exotic perfume, treading through the music's field of glass shards like a sensual masochist. A miraculous moment occurs when his hands are free from the keyboard for a mere second and the sounds of quaking ducks and the wind rustling in the leaves come trickling in through the windows, merging with the music and creating an image of pastoral mysticism.

His interpretation of Rimsky-Korsakow's „Scheherazade“ is equally dense. Tonight's version had originally been transcribed and trusted to an Auto-Piano by Sergej Prokofjew. After decades of oblivion, Vinocour has now finally put it to paper and his rendition is making a convincing statement on the value of Prokofjew's editing. Orchestral without sounding too imitative, cinematic without shedding its intimacy, cyclic without losing itself in mechanical repetition and pulsating with a dark and sinister glow, it is a piece whose sinfully romantic chord progressions and sometimes heart-wrenchingly simplistic melodies make it seem as contemporary and burning with immediate urgency as any HipHop track from the Ghetto.

In the intermission, there is plenty of time to take a look at the exhibition on display during the festival: „Jaques Leiser – Portraits and Legends“. It, too, offers vivid relicts from a different time. Leiser, who grew up in Italy and France, is one of the most renowned musical photographers of the 20th century. In his extensive working relationship with EMI and as a freelance artist from 1964 onwards, he has spent time with some of the biggest names of the music biz – and captured them in both majestic

poses and disarmingly personal moments. In the 50s, 60s and 70s, the stars of the classical music scene were the stars of the masses and Leiser has photographed them all: Svatoslav Richter, Alfred Cortot, Krystian Zimerman and Van Cliburn (both as teenagers), Heitor Villa-Lobos and Claudio Abbado. His pictures are technically brilliant and yet they never suggest an analytical distance between their spectator and his muse – it is as if these legends were part of his own family and vice versa. Eva Köhler of the „Internationale Stiftung zur Foerderung von Kultur und Zivilisation“ hands me a torn-out page from the local newspaper, which contains an article on Leiser and his philosophy. „I'm missing spontaneity in today's music“, he is quoted as saying, „There's a lack of risk.“ Faced with these hypnotisingly vivid black and white portraits, one can't help but think the same to be true in photography as well. A ring of a bell encourages us back to the concert. Vinocour is still as eager, greedy and engaged as ever. He seems to have preferred a double espresso over a glass of white wine during the break. The second half of the program is certainly more edgy, though, ominous colours and abstract art playing a decisive role. Prokofjew's „Missing Son“ and „Chose en soi“ op. 45a/b („It's NOT opus 45a and opus 45b“, Vinocour stresses, „It's opus 45 and one of the pieces is called „A“ and the other „B““) turn into cathartic celebrations. Written as a sort of reward to himself after pleasing the public for years, these pieces, dismissed as sound-poetic experiments at their time, deserve renewed appraisal. The same goes for the transcription of the composer's ballet „Missing Son“. Vinocour brings out the sheer dynamic breadth of the music, going from near-silence and aroused quietude to contagiously gripping, boastfully brimming scales.

A self-announced pre-listening session to his upcoming new album, the rendition of eleven variations on „Sleeping Beauty“ by Tchaikovsky are the grand finale of the night. You can see how much Vinocour's entire body has become one with these tracks, some of which are mere miniatures. Jumping from upbeat Waltzes to introvert moments of sadness and consolation, he creates a nervous tension arch of crassly contrasting emotions. You can hear the audience coughing, rearranging their position and their clothes rustling in between pieces, but this is by no means down to their lack of interest. Rather, each and every single one of these compositions requires utmost concentration and evokes rich mental landscapes – when the last note has died down, it feels as though hours had passed in a few minutes.

The concert is over, but Vinocour's exit turns into another scintillating appendix. On the waves of hollering applause, he keeps returning for ever-new last encores, each one shorter, faster and more hilarious than the previous. At the very end, he plays for a mere ten seconds, then puts the lid firmly back on the keyboard, takes a deep bow, both arms crossed over his chest and then hobbles out of the room. As serious, profound and emotionally swaying as the music might have been – there is a smile of joy on every face.

Next morning, over coffee, I decide to extend my visit by a couple of hours. Instead of boarding an early train, I walk into town and visit the Theodor-Storm Centre, former home to the poet, author, composer and Husum's most celebrated son. Outwardly a regular house in a narrow side-alley, it has been completely redecorated to match the original style of its famous former inhabitants. There aren't all that many visitors at this relatively early hour (I enter the Museum shortly after it has opened its doors at 10am) and I walk through the rooms feeling as though I were invited over for a cup of tea, waiting for the hosts to arrive. In a bizarre way, it feels as though they actually could.

The more I read about Storm, the more I start to like him. He seems to have been a man who fell in love easily and felt strongly about literature, politics and his family. He

talks about „composing“ his rooms instead of „arranging“ them and in a corner, I actually find one of his musical scores (a piece for Piano and Voice). His writing-room is a small, meditative space with redwine-red walls and thick, green carpets, dark-wooden cupboards displaying a romantic library behind proud glass doors. You can still sense an aura of immense concentration and the poet's composed ghostly presence. At his time, Storm was easily the most popular German author, with total sales well over 10 Million copies. His popularity has waned, but never receded completely: The Storm-society is alive and kicking, still publishing a massive annual book with scientific essays for its members – it has by now reached volume 57.

I pick up Storm's most famous novel, „The Dykemaster“ at a cozy bookstore near the house he used to live in and sit down in the city's harbour for a coffee and a muffin. As if draped and coloured by Storm himself, the sky is a ghastly grey, but just enough of the sun's rays still manage to slip through the clouds. It is a real feel-good moment. Unlike Weimar, whose worship of Goethe I found to be rather tiring and commercialised, Husum is treating the arts with true respect and affection. Lev Vinocour may have felt inspired by the same creative and kindred ambiance when he entered the stage yesterday night – the city's music fans certainly seems to have waved him goodbye as though he were one of their own.

By Tobias Fischer

Special thanks to Eva Köhler and Erich Fischer of the „Internationale Stiftung zur Förderung von Kultur und Zivilisation“ Munich

Homepage: [Lev Vinocour](http://www.vinocour.de/)  
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