

World-Class Vienna Philharmonic Hits Moscow

By [Raymond Stults](#)

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The Vienna Philharmonic, often described as one of the best orchestras in the world, played three concerts in Moscow's Tchaikovsky Concert Hall. **Courtesy Of The Musical Olympus Foundation**

In the remarkably short span of 15 days, ending last Sunday, Moscow was visited by two of what are likely the best symphony orchestras in the world.

First came Amsterdam's Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, led by its chief conductor since 2004, Latvian-born Mariss Jansons, in a pair of concerts devoted to music of Ludwig van Beethoven, Richard Strauss and Gustav Mahler. Following after it was the Vienna Philharmonic, under the direction of German conductor Christian Thielemann, with a series of four concerts devoted to Beethoven's nine symphonies and brought to Moscow under the auspices of the St. Petersburg-based Musical Olympus Foundation.

Being away at the time, I missed hearing the Concertgebouw. But I did manage to catch three Vienna Philharmonic concerts, the net result of which was one of the most memorable

experiences in more than two decades of listening to music in Moscow.

Beethoven's symphonies form a regular part of the Vienna Philharmonic's repertoire. But its performing them all at a single stretch had previously occurred only 14 times in the 171 years since the orchestra was founded.

Thielemann, at 54, ranks among the most highly regarded conductors of his generation and is currently in charge of the Dresden Staatskapelle, one of Germany's leading orchestras, and the Salzburg Easter Festival. He acts as musical adviser to the Bayreuth Festival, where he has led the operas of Richard Wagner each summer since 2000 and where I first became acquainted with his conducting at a magnificent performance of "Tannhäuser" ten years ago.

I have to admit being a bit disappointed by the first concert. The technically and interpretively daunting Fourth Symphony, which opened the cycle, sounded to me somewhat undernourished and lacking in dynamism. No doubt that was partly due to my being seated in the first row of the Tchaikovsky Hall parterre, where intimacy with the second violin section tended to overemphasize its role in the performance.

Moving some rows back for the Fifth Symphony, which followed, I was able to hear the orchestra in all its glory. This time, the score emerged gloriously as well.

I found nothing at all to quibble about at the other concerts I attended. At the second, the bucolic charm of movements one, two and five of the "Pastorale" Symphony, No. 6, was caught to perfection, as were the rollicking peasant dance and the vivid depiction of a sudden thunderstorm heard in between.

Next came the Seventh Symphony, superbly structured and paced by Thielemann and particularly notable for the conductor's leading the rhythmic allegretto second movement at a real allegretto tempo, rather than at the slower andante, favored by so many conductors, that often turns the movement into a lifeless dirge.

Sunday's final concert opened with the compact and lively Eighth Symphony, one I never recall seeing listed on a Moscow concert program. Thielemann and the orchestra performed it with all the loving care it so richly deserves.

Wrapping up the cycle on Sunday was the "Choral" Symphony, No. 9, in a performance that proved truly overwhelming. Each of its four long movements — the episodic opening allegro, the fierce scherzo, the hymn-like adagio and the great finale, in which chorus and a quartet of vocal soloists join in to sing the words of Friedrich Schiller's "Ode to Joy" — was impressively shaped and propelled under Thielemann's baton. The chorus of young singers from Moscow's Popov Academy of Choral Art and a team of distinguished soloists from Russia, South Korea, Australia and The Netherlands all acquitted themselves superbly.

In my earliest days of serious listening to music, there were, as I recall, only two sets of complete recordings of Beethoven's symphonies — one by Arturo Toscanini, the other by the formidable Austro-German maestro Felix Weingartner. Hearing them, I tended to favor the latter's interpretations, particularly those of the Seventh, Eighth and Ninth symphonies, recorded with the Vienna Philharmonic in 1935 and 1936, and I have continued to treasure them right up to the present day. As I listened to the same three symphonies last week's

concerts, I found an almost uncanny resemblance between what I heard from the Vienna Philharmonic under Thielemann's direction and the performances to be found on the orchestra's recordings of nearly eight decades ago.

Any reasonably good orchestra with a competent conductor in charge is likely to receive an ovation following the triumphant conclusion to the Fifth Symphony, the irresistible momentum of the Seventh's last movement or the heavenly final 20 minutes of the Ninth.

But the tremendous applause and cheers that greeted each of those last week struck me as being more than just a run-of-the-mill ovation. Amid all the clamor, I sensed each time a truly sincere and heartfelt outpouring of thanks, something I have seldom felt aware of at any concert anywhere.

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