

## **Crossover Concert with Blues Harp in Zürich's Tonhalle**

Premiere of "Blues Harp Concerto Nr. 1" by the Zürich-based Composer and Harmonica Soloist Roland van Straaten

The blues harp or harmonica is an unusual choice of instrument for a full concert, especially if you are trying to fill churches and concert halls. Combined with a symphonic orchestra, it could turn out to be quite special - at least that's what many concert-goers were anticipating as they braved a snowstorm to go to the performance in Zürich on Saturday, 27<sup>th</sup> February.

The piece for blues harp and orchestra was commissioned by the "Tonhalle" society and performed by the internationally-reknowned soloist Roland van Straaten from Zürich. In the first half of the evening, framed by Haydn's symphony No. 48 "Maria Theresia" and Ludwig van Beethoven's sixth symphony in F-sharp - the Pastoral - Roland van Straaten transported the audience into his unique world of sound. His harmonica was at times powerful, but also light, oriental even and always at one with the very different tone of the Zürich Symphonic Orchestra.

The blues filled the concert hall, and the orchestra caught the mood. The first section of the three-part "Blues Harp Concerto Nr.1" was called "Early" and here van Straaten described the mystical energy which descends from the heavens to enter our consciences early in the morning. At times the earthly presence of the harmonica, played throughout with amplification, threatened to obscure the sound of the orchestra.

Critics have described van Straaten's style as "World Music", and "Early" is reminiscent of ambient pop music. It was however also memorable for van Straaten's charismatic playing style. It's astonishing to hear the fullness and swing in the sounds he can extract from his blues harp. The symphonic orchestra followed him closely in what often resembled a film soundtrack. The second part of the concert was called "Ne Zil Rã", and depicted the dynamic dance of an enchanted king spinning around surrounded by exotic plants. The symphonic orchestra danced alongside van Straaten and sent his oriental notes whirling around the hall.

The third part of the evening "Till the Blues Come" saw the blues harp come into its own. The orchestra laid down a genuine blues backing with bass drum rolls and shuffly rhythms, as van Straaten masterfully improvised on top. The crowd was delighted, with many nodding or tapping their feet in time.

There's no question about it, this is one date with the blues that had a happy end. At its most intensive, the combination with the orchestra was a successful synthesis of two different worlds of sound and experience. Hopefully the volume of the amplified solo instrument can be moderated in future, but over all the combination of Roland van Straaten's world music with the symphonic orchestra was impressive. One can only wish for more development of this particular musical genre.

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