

Review**Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra (November 3)**

by Guytano Parks



It was a beautiful, clear and crisp autumn afternoon this past Sunday in University Circle. Brett Mitchell, newly appointed music director of The Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra and assistant conductor of The Cleveland Orchestra, conducted equally clear and crisp performances by COYO in a program at Severance Hall which featured the orchestral sections individually and collectively in works by Shostakovich, Stravinsky, Kilar and Mussorgsky.

A bright and chipper *Festive Overture* by Shostakovich opened the concert, revealing Mitchell to be a conductor full of charismatic energy and excitement as his enthusiasm prodded the musicians to exciting heights through sharp and precise gestures. Playfully tossing melodies back and forth between sections with effective variances of tone color and character, the music joyfully galloped toward its spirited conclusion.

The winds and strings were featured in the next two works: Stravinsky's *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* and Kilar's *Orawa* for strings. In the cubist-like Stravinsky piece — a complex mosaic-like network whose elements combine, conflict and interlock — the players are extremely vulnerable as every detail of articulation, phrasing, dynamics and balance are exposed due to the absence of the cushioning sound of strings. A daunting challenge for any seasoned ensemble, the wind players of this orchestra of young musicians did quite an admirable job of pulling it off.

The strings were up next in Kilar's pulsing and exuberant piece *Orawa*, the name of a region of southern Poland and a word for a cut highland meadow which serves as a site for autumn festivals of folk-dancing and shepherdly camaraderie. The minimalist opening morphed and developed with repeated patterns in a style akin to that of John Adams and Steve Reich. It was reminiscent of Phillip Glass as colors, textures, energy and excitement built organically from thematic and rhythmic seeds. Mitchell and orchestra were splendid, joyfully conveying the contemplation of nature's power and humanity's vista in this evocation of a harvest feast on an orawa meadow.

After intermission came Ravel's masterful orchestration of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Originally written for solo piano, this suite of fifteen pieces is a portrayal of a visitor at the gallery strolling from picture to picture. The opening Promenade theme was effectively played — at times confident and bold, at others reflective and contemplative

— and repeated several times throughout the suite in varying moods and orchestrations. A gnarly *Gnomus*, haunting *The Old Castle*, and playful *Tuileries* were all performed with great character. The light and humorous *Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks* contrasted nicely with *Samuel Goldberg and Schmuyle*, a portrayal of an argument between a rich man and a poor man.

There were only a few small sections where a bit more repose would have benefitted the reading, but conductor and orchestra continued with their fine sense of contrast as the hustle and bustle of an open market was portrayed in *Limoges le marché*. Excitingly played, it swelled up in a crescendo only to suddenly break off breathlessly, finding us in the ominous *Catacombs*. The ensuing *The Hut on Fowl's Legs: Baba Yaga* spine-tinglingly evoked the child-eating witch of Russian folklore and led into the grand finale, *The Great Gate of Kiev*. All the stops were pulled out as the COYO and Brett Mitchell played with a sense of arrival, mustering up all of the brilliance and grandeur needed to conclude Mussorgsky's colorful work.

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