

Cleveland Orchestra at Blossom with Jahja Ling and Yo Yo Ma (August 16)

by Nicholas Jones



Yo Yo Ma is as close as the classical world is likely to get to a rock star. On Saturday night, the near-sellout crowd at Blossom was certainly rocking as Ma took the stage, strutting like a winning prizefighter with his cello triumphantly raised above his head.

But antics gave way to artistry almost immediately as Ma took his seat and launched into the Elgar cello concerto, stamping its opening chords with a ferocity that would alternate with lyricism throughout the performance.

In 1919, Elgar's cello concerto suffered from a disastrous first performance, and for almost half a century it was barely played. A key figure in its rediscovery in the late 1960s was the charismatic young cellist Jacqueline du Pré, who reinterpreted it as a document of introspection and anxiety for a world newly tossed by war and social change. One of the cellos that Yo Yo Ma regularly plays is the Davidov Stradivarius on which du Pré also performed.

At Blossom, Ma gave a transcendent performance of the Elgar, supported masterfully by conductor Jahja Ling and an orchestra that was playing subtly and sensitively. The concerto took on both beauty and sadness — a lament for something precious, now lost. The idea for the concerto (and indeed, the opening tune) had come to Elgar just after the end of World War One, as the composer lay in a hospital bed recovering from an operation. Its plangent melancholy reflects the terrible losses of the war and, more personally, the shifting musical taste that was to make Elgar's late-romantic style seem irrelevant for the next decades.

Ma treated the concerto's elegiac quality as an occasion for a vigorous, almost heroic meditation about the necessity of beauty in a darkening world. Though he played, as always, with complete familiarity and knowledge of the music and of his instrument, underneath his technical ease lay a stringent artistic attentiveness. Again and again, Ma's rapid and purposeful bow intensified notes that in another hand might be merely played.

The second movement *Allegro* with its rapid-fire sixteenth notes became not just a dazzling *tour-de-force*, but also something more dangerous and obsessive. I was reminded of poet Wilfred Owen's line about "the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle" (Owen died in the trenches in 1918, a week before the end of the war).

The slow sections of the concerto, particularly the heartbreaking third movement *Adagio*, born of a passionate romanticism, featured a multitude of expressive leaps that seemed to carry the solo voice ever higher and higher. The playing, both from soloist and orchestra, was sensitive and rich, dramatic without apology.

The final movement is itself almost a recapitulation of the entire concerto, full of contrasts and of emotion. The principal motif (a repeated pattern of an eighth note and two sixteenths) might have sounded jaunty in another context, but here it was tinged with darkness: the entire orchestra seemed to whirl about with the soloist in a frenzied and almost macabre dance.

All that drama paid off big-time just before the end of the concerto, when, by contrast, the music pulled back to a gorgeous *pianissimo* in orchestra and soloist, a brief moment of meditation that took us beyond all anxieties, before powering on to a deliberately unresolved conclusion.

Ma shared hugs and high-fives with Jahja Ling during the standing ovation, as well as a bit of comedy about playing an encore — Ma wordlessly and jovially insisting that it was Ling alone who was insisting on his playing some more. The crowd was happy to sit back down as Ma played Tchaikovsky's serene *Andante cantabile* in the composer's own arrangement for cello and string orchestra.

Before playing the Elgar, the orchestra had warmed the crowd up with Smetana's dashing overture to *The Bartered Bride*. This piece is so familiar that veterans in the orchestra could probably play it in their sleep, but this performance was anything but sleepy. The pace was truly *Vivacissimo*, as Smetana marked it, and the ensemble was stunningly precise. The second violins especially earned their laurels with their long first statement of the demanding fugue subject, whisper-quiet and dead accurate. The longtime affection of the Cleveland Orchestra for Jahja Ling was evident in their attentiveness to his demanding pace and his scrupulous dynamic control.

For the second half of the concert, the orchestra played Dvořák's Symphony in D, opus 60 (known now as #6, though it was the first of Dvořák's symphonies to be published and was confusingly known for some time as #1).

Dvořák is almost always a crowd-pleaser, and I expect that this high-volume rendition carried well out onto the Blossom lawn. But despite energetic playing, I was disappointed in the performance. The strings went for an aggressive sound, with lots of *martelé* bowing that tended to the heavy-handed. As a result, Dvořák's eminently danceable rhythms came out as more stolid than graceful. The famous third-movement *Furiant*, with its vivacious and characteristically Czech alternations of duple and triple meter, seemed more manic than pleasurable.

In the quieter sections (the Adagio, reminiscent of Beethoven's lyrical ninth symphony slow movement, and the pastoral Trio section of the third movement), there was a welcome sense of lyric repose. But even here, the ensemble seemed less than convincing, especially in the extended dialogues of woodwinds and horn.

The concert as a whole was warmly received, though, and the audience clearly went home happy. Two out of three's not bad, when the two are played as stunningly as these winners were.

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