

**Cleveland Orchestra Brahms weekend:
Concerto No. 2 with Bronfman (Feb. 19)**



by Daniel Hathaway

The program notes mentioned that Johannes Brahms and Hans von Bulow enjoyed programming Brahms's piano concertos, deciding at the last moment who would conduct and who would play piano. Some feat that, but Yefim Bronfman may top it this weekend when he plays both concertos in pairs of concerts over four days with Franz Welser-Möst and The Cleveland Orchestra.

Thursday's concert was being recorded for a forthcoming DVD, so camerapeople surrounded the stage and occupied the end boxes, while a boom camera craned its neck, giraffe-like, over the orchestra and audience on stage right.

Bronfman played the second concerto on Thursday evening with predictably stellar results. The 40-minute work, completed in 1881 and symphonic in scale and concept, is

the work of a composer who has become skilled in the manipulation of large forms. Here, Brahms treats the soloist as an equal partner with the orchestra — perhaps a third element in addition to the strings and the *Harmonie* (wind section).

Unlike its predecessor, which begins with a long orchestral prelude, the second concerto gets right down to business. A lush horn solo (Richard King) followed by a sweeping gesture from the piano initiates a lively conversation between soloist and orchestra that continues with a rich mix of wisdom, humor and wit through the three successive movements.

Yefim Bronfman has the uncanny ability to play large without stridency, to handle the most delicate passages without losing presence, and to play everything in between with a ravishing sense of tonal color. His technique is up to anything a composer can throw at him, and he made Brahms's challenges seem like delightful puzzles, easily solved.



Welser-Möst and Bronfman brought pulsing energy to the concerto's second movement Scherzo, setting up an oasis of calm for the third, slow movement which began and ended with an affecting solo by principal cellist Mark Kosower. That segued immediately into the genial finale, whose last chords were nearly obliterated by roars of approval from the audience. Acknowledging the applause, Bronfman gave a well-deserved nod to the Orchestra and a big hug to Kosower.

The concert opened with more Brahms: the 1873 *Variations on a Theme (not!) by Haydn*, and the 1880 *Tragic Overture*. The variations, eight in number and based on a divertimento for wind instruments of unknown origin, exist in a parallel arrangement the composer made for two pianos (those who have played them in that version just might have felt their fingers pulsing along with the delightful music).

Considering the origins of the piece, the wind section plays an important role, and The Cleveland Orchestra *Harmonie* came together in a glorious blend. Franz Welser-Möst urged the variations forward, taking little breathing time between movements. The playing was fluent, balanced and splendid.

The *Tragic Overture*, the composer's response to an honorary doctorate from the University of Breslau, is a tight, ten-minute essay in its subject that manages to be dramatic without becoming grim. Arrestingly played, it brought the only somber moment into a remarkably cheerful evening of Brahms.

Thursday's program will be repeated on Friday at 8. On Saturday at 8 and Sunday at 3, organist Paul Jacobs will open the proceedings with organ selections by Brahms and Johann Sebastian Bach. The *Tragic Overture* will be back, followed after intermission by Brahms's first piano concerto.

Photos by Roger Mastroianni courtesy of The Cleveland Orchestra.

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