

Review: Cleveland Orchestra with Jahja Ling & Daniil Trifonov (March 19)

by Daniel Hathaway



If you didn't catch one of last weekend's Cleveland Orchestra concerts, you missed an extraordinary experience. Pianist Daniil Trifonov, making his Severance Hall debut on Thursday evening, March 19, was simply breathtaking in Shostakovich's first concerto — in cahoots with principal trumpet Michael Sachs and guest conductor Jahja Ling. And Ling's interpretation of Rachmaninoff's second symphony — the only other work on the program — was as sonorously thrilling as it was expertly paced.

With a crystalline flourish, Trifonov set the concerto off on an eventful 25-minute journey. Whether hunched over the keyboard or half-standing to play with more weight, Daniil Trifonov was in complete control of a piece that brims over with musical material, including more than a few passing quotations from other composers' music. Hair flying back and forth and sideways, Trifonov was as much fun to watch as to listen to.



Shut your eyes, though, and the musical conversation between pianist, trumpeter, conductor and string orchestra was pointed and precise, every note in place even in brisk, ricocheting passages where the piano has to answer orchestral chords between beats. Michael Sach's trumpet lines provided an alluring contrast to the restless musings of the solo piano and contributed extra punctuation to declamatory sections.



On Thursday, Trifonov tempered his youthful exuberance with his remarkable musical maturity to create a performance that will live in many memories. The audience loved it, giving Trifonov, Sachs and Ling a hearty ovation and several callbacks.

Very different Russian music filled out the evening. We have hypnotism to thank for Rachmaninoff's second symphony — treatments which brought the composer out of a lengthy funk — and there's actually something hypnotic about the work itself. It's like watching a heavy surf crashing in and retreating only to gather energy for the next wave. The composer packs more climaxes into the piece than you can count, events that grow and subside only to build again toward the next one.

Jahja Ling shaped the work masterfully, allowing it to flow and ebb with both spontaneity and control, and sorting its peak moments into small, medium and large. That allowed the audience to let Rachmaninoff's radiantly emotional score wash over them without becoming musically inundated or sonically fatigued. And as big as some moments became, they were large instead of merely loud. Ling's concept blended the brass beautifully into the string and wind mix, producing a round, golden sound with no sharp edges.

Russian composers use woodwinds in unusual combinations for coloristic purposes, and the symphony was larded with beautiful wind playing. Especially remarkable were Franklin Cohen's widely varied clarinet solos — ranging from his gorgeous extended solo in the slow movement to one phrase that sailed out above the orchestra like a beacon. The violin and viola sections reveled in their separate section solos, and the horns covered themselves in glory more than once.

The audience brought Ling back to the stage for several bows, accolades he shared with the players, with whom he has had a long relationship. They bonded once again on Thursday evening, with glorious results.

Photos by Roger Mastroianni courtesy of The Cleveland Orchestra.

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