

## Cleveland Orchestra: Beethoven & Elgar with Znaider & Bronfman (Mar. 1)

by Daniel Hathaway



Conductor Nikolaj Znaider and pianist Yefim Bronfman brought two grand works with them to their guest appearances with The Cleveland Orchestra at Severance Hall on Thursday evening, March 1. Beethoven's well-known Fifth Piano Concerto and Elgar's lesser-known Second Symphony gave both the soloist and the orchestra ample

opportunity to fill the house with magnificent music on a blustery, snowy evening that left an unusual number of seats unoccupied.

Though the concerto was tagged “Emperor” without Beethoven's approval — and he would never have considered that nickname, given his freethinking political leanings — the work breathes a spacious majesty that sets it apart from the composer's other four piano concertos.

Bronfman is a powerful performer who is also capable of great delicacy. He mined the E-flat concerto for all its stateliness and elegance, producing robust tone in loud passages and subtle coloration in softer moments. The slow movement was pure magic, and Bronfman brought similar sleight-of-hand to his transition into the Rondo. Although Znaider's pacing of the first movement veered on grandiloquence, the finale was lithe, bright, and dazzling.

Bronfman responded to a big ovation with a beautifully nuanced performance of Debussy's *Clair de lune*.

The Cleveland Orchestra generally shies away from British music, and Elgar's second symphony is a case in point. William Steinberg conducted it in 1950, and its most recent outing was led by another guest conductor, André Previn, in 1992.



Danish guest conductor Nikolaj Znaider thinks highly enough of Elgar's 1911 work, dedicated to the memory of Edward VIII, to have bothered to memorize it. He led a sonically thrilling performance on Thursday evening, replete with all the emotional elements that characterized British society on the eve of the collapse of empire and before the guns of August launched the Great War.

If its nationalistic ebullience seems dated, the Elgar offers an authentic panorama of a moment in time, and its elegiac gestures ring true. The Cleveland Orchestra, playing this music for the first time in a generation, masterfully put across the virtuosity of the Rondo and sang the long phrases of the finale like a chorus at the last night of the Proms, where the spirit of Elgar lives on today, if ever so briefly.

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