

CityMusic: all Beethoven with violinist Tessa Lark (May 20)

by Daniel Hathaway



Surely it was just a coincidence that CityMusic Cleveland's final series of concerts mostly duplicated works The Cleveland Orchestra had played the week before in the third concert of its all-Beethoven Prometheus Project at Severance Hall. The unique piece on CityMusic's program

was the *Violin Concerto*, which received a glowing performance by Tessa Lark and the ensemble on Sunday afternoon, May 20 in St. Noel Church in Willoughby.

Music director Avner Dorman opened the program with the gloomy *Coriolan Overture*, a piece whose dramatic rests are nearly as important as its notes. Dorman kept the tension flowing between the opening chords, assisted by the lively acoustic of the modern building. A lyrical melody only temporarily brings sunlight into the piece, which ends with portentous pizzicatos. Though not the most challenging of Beethoven's orchestral works, CityMusic embellished the overture with a patina of professionalism.

A program change moved the Eighth Symphony to the center of the concert. A compact, witty piece, the work is laced with subtle Beethovenian humor and self-parody, including a scherzo-like second movement suggested (or maybe not) by Maelzel's ticky-tocky metronome, a backward-looking minuet with an elaborate trio featuring solo clarinet plus cello and two horns (ending dangerously on a high F for

the clarinet), and a wild finale that veers off into unrelated keys and almost refuses to end, inspiring one of the composer's longest and funniest codas.

Everything in CityMusic's performance was tidily in place, but Dorman seemed content to lead a straightforward reading that passed up numerous opportunities to bring out the symphony's special moments. Some details were just miscalculated: a *ritardando* in the last two bars of the opening movement made a lyrical statement out of the composer's final, dismissive statement of its theme.



After intermission, violinist Tessa Lark joined the ensemble for her third solo appearance with CityMusic. She was recently featured in the Dvořák concerto, and in John Corigliano's "*The Red Violin*" Concerto with the composer in attendance on his 80th birthday — an occasion when the Kentucky native also brought down the house with a bluegrass encore.

Her virtuosity aside, Lark's playing is so appealing because of its complete honesty and directness. From her first entrance in Beethoven's only concerto-length piece featuring the violin, she produced a singing tone that penetrated the heart, and throughout the work her musical intelligence stimulated the brain in equal measure.

Lark, Dorman, and the orchestra collaborated in a tightly-controlled performance that still left room for lyricism and spontaneity. The violinist's cadenzas were eloquent, and she made joyful moments out of each return of the rondo theme in the final movement. No wonder that Tessa Lark has just joined the ranks of distinguished musicians who have won Borletti-Buitoni fellowships (and that on top of an Avery

Fisher Career Grant, and medals at the Naumburg and Indianapolis violin competitions). We hope she'll keep showing up in Cleveland.

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