

Opinion:
**The Cleveland Orchestra —
Prometheus or Epimetheus?**

by David Kulma



As noted in The Cleveland Orchestra’s program book for The Prometheus Project, the mythological Titan’s forgotten brother Epimetheus “spent much of his time thinking about yesterday, and last week, or looking at the history of a hundred years ago.”

The Orchestra ended its 100th season celebrating two revolutionaries: Prometheus and Ludwig van Beethoven. Music director Franz Welser-Möst’s goal for The Prometheus Project was to link the light-giving Titan to the powerful Enlightenment composer, and through them connect to “the idea of fighting for good.” This celebration of revolutions past is noble, but it also points out how the Cleveland institution appears more like his backward-looking sibling than Prometheus himself.

In a way, TCO’s festival of Beethoven symphonies and overtures makes all the sense in the world. A major anniversary is a time to renew vows, and these works stand as the central nexus of orchestral music. A call to reexamine them together explores and questions their meaning — not just in their early-19th-century Viennese context, but also in our early-21st-century American world.

In my [reviews](#) of four of the concerts, I noted that Welser-Möst and the Orchestra made a powerful case for Beethoven in 2018. The excellence on display every week at Severance Hall is a feat that never ceases to amaze, but the Orchestra’s programming is worrisome and out of step with the society outside its Euclid Avenue home.

Inclusion and representation matter: we must notice whose music gets to speak through The Cleveland Orchestra, and whose doesn't. We heard from no women composers, no composers of color, and no living American composers this past season. In this broader context, TCO's programming has not reflected the forward-thinking ideals of The Prometheus Project.

As [Douglas Shadle](#) argues, musical greatness is culturally determined: our society's systemic problems are in evidence when we select which music is worthy of our attention. This is how The Cleveland Orchestra can regularly choose Beethoven symphonies — the Fifth appears every other season on average — and ignore the works of many other composers. If this continues, TCO will not only be irrelevant to our present, but to our future as well.

The Prometheus Project's program book unwittingly underlines this conflict by including a quote from jazz legend [Nina Simone](#), who was unfortunately not successful in entering the world of classical music. She dreamed of being a professional pianist who played Beethoven and Bach, but was denied entry to the Curtis Institute of Music on what she considered racist grounds.

I'm not arguing for an overturning of values whereby Beethoven's music is consigned to the dumpsters, but the glaring absence of women composers and composers of color from The Cleveland Orchestra's repertoire needs to be called out. The defensive call of "meritocracy" and the ever-present concepts of "greatness" and "genius" stand as crutches for maintaining the status quo, rather than creating a better, more inclusive future. A future where a Beethoven symphony would hopefully be only one item in a season that includes underrepresented composers from the past and present. (Look to the Los Angeles Philharmonic's upcoming [100th season](#) as a worthy model.)

If The Cleveland Orchestra wants to live up to its Promethean ideals, it needs to better reflect the ideals of a 21st-century America.

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