

**Concert Report: Cleveland Orchestra all-Wagner concert
with Measha Brueggengosman (February 18)**

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Although the playlist for the Cleveland Orchestra's all-Wagner program last week was reminiscent of those "composers' greatest hits" CD's you can buy in the checkout line at the supermarket, the concert we heard under the leadership of Franz Welser-Möst on Thursday evening, February 18 was a deeply satisfying experience.

Featuring purely orchestral excerpts from 'Rienzi', 'Tristan and Isolde', 'Die Meistersinger' and 'Die Walküre', the program employed a singer only for one non-operatic episode -- the Wesendonck Songs -- strategically placed after intermission and treating the audience once again to the enthralling singing of Measha Brueggengosman.

As Thomas May's excellent and accessible program notes pointed out, Wagner waited long years to hear many of his compositions realized on the stage. In the meanwhile, the concert world got a preview of coming attractions in just the sort of orchestral excerpts we heard tonight. The Cleveland Orchestra rose to the occasion with mellifluous, golden-hued playing in lyrical sections, and hair-raising virtuosity when required.

The program opened with the Overture to 'Rienzi', its initial long trumpet notes expertly intoned by Michael Sachs and answered by mellow brass chords against roudades from the strings.

The famous big tune was elegantly shaped with fine unanimity of detail each time it appeared, and the work built to rousing climaxes. Funny to think that the opera is based on a historical novel by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, author of the infamous "it was a dark and stormy night".

Wonderfully blended celli opened the extravagantly emotional 'Prelude and Love-Death' from 'Tristan'. Wagner's idea of coupling two far-separated excerpts from the opera together into a concert work was an inspired one. Amazing swells and ebbs of sound and an insistent upward sequence set the stage for Isolde's transfiguration -- here a purely instrumental one, although there's the option of using a singer.

The Prelude to Act III of Lohengrin was a burst of pure virtuosity with gleaming brass and perfect blend between low strings and trombones. On the other hand, the atmospheric ending of the Prelude to the first act of the same opera provided a real cliff-hanger at the end of the first half of the program.

Wagner's five songs are settings of poems by Mathilde Wesendonck composed while he was living with his first wife in a cottage on the Wesendonck's estate near Zurich (and yet another occasion on which the composer was initiating an affair with someone else's wife). Originally conceived for voice and piano, Wagner later orchestrated only the fifth, 'Träume', leaving the other four to be adapted by Felix Mottl. The short pieces are through-composed (no text is repeated) and go past quickly. Though all five songs are charming -- sometimes in spite of the rather tragic or melancholy poetry they set -- the third, 'In the Greenhouse' is quite haunting.

Measha Brueggengosman was visually resplendent in a shiny, dark silver gown and long, gold neck chains (and barefoot, as usual), and vocally magnificent, drawing on deep wells of vocal color and singing commandingly above full orchestra even in the middle of her range.

Franz Welser-Möst's obvious plan to link the last two works on the program -- the Prelude to 'Die

Meistersinger' and the 'Ride of the Valkyries' -- was frustrated momentarily by a bit of awkward reseating in the trombone and tuba row, but the two war-horses that closed the program were full of nobility and excitement, rich in orchestral tone and color and yet so transparent that one could hear every level of detail. The Valkyries often have a wild ride through this piece; this performance was spacious and worthy of the warrior-maidens who are retrieving slain heroes from the battlefield. Need we add that the horns, trombones and tubas in particular were just about as fine as you'll ever hear?