

Music From The Western Reserve: Silberschlag & Friends (Oct. 11)

by Nicholas Stevens



For this reviewer, concerts these days seem always to have a single moment of emotional breakthrough. Chalk it up to pandemic-era life's tendency to congeal into numbing routine, but even familiar material can take on new significance when heard live-streamed through earbuds

during an otherwise undifferentiated mass of homebound time. All this to say that when Music From The Western Reserve returned with a stream by Cleveland Orchestra principal horn Nathaniel Silberschlag and his friends and family last month, the most soul-stirring moment arrived suddenly and decisively.

Comments by artistic director and general manager Zsolt Bognár opened the streamed concert, premiered on the organization's YouTube channel on Sunday, October 11 and still up now. Bognár's tribute to the Akron-area pianist, patron, and ubiquitous concert volunteer Lola Rothmann, who passed in September at the age of 97, established a gravity from which the rest of the stream lifted off. Next came an interview with Silberschlag, the featured artist around whom the varied program revolved, who revealed that his family gave him a custom miniature horn to play as a child — a sign of things to come.

Silberschlag became the principal horn of The Cleveland Orchestra in his twenties for a reason, and Krol's *Laudatio* afforded the still-uninitiated a sense of his unerring fidelity to the local style. A ghost of vibrato haunted the solo's opening arcs, confidence suffusing the catalog of ideal articulations that followed: sharp, ringing, separated, elided. Fast to slow, high to low, ending with a perfectly faded-out long tone, the performance transcended technique in moments when the contemporary piece waxed Romantic, its declamatory parts steely and stern.

Trumpeter Zachary Silberschlag (brother to Nathaniel) joined for a *Fantasy* on Mercadante's opera *Il Giuramento* ("The Oath"), the brass players assuming singing tones as pianist Lior Willinger took up the orchestral parts. Infused with a theatrical sense of direction and build, the performance found the brothers tightly coordinated and Willinger passionately engaged. Zachary Silberschlag and Willinger remained energized through *Klezmerelda*, Jean-Francois Michel's peppy, witty parade of mournful and celebratory themes of Eastern European character.

The highlight arrived with the expansion of the family-and-friend circle when pianist Sherri Fenwick joined a brass quartet that included the previously featured Silberschlags, their trumpet-playing father Jeffrey, and trombonist Bryan Bourne. The spiritual *Let Us Break Bread Together*, performed with straightforward emotion in the brass and celestial keyboard rhythms from Fenwick, felt pointed in a year when lamenting society's divisions compounds not only the divisions themselves, but the literal, physical inability to sit together and talk through them.

When drummer Roy Johnson joined Fenwick and the brasses for Richard Smallwood's *Total Praise*, the spiritual stakes of this portion of the concert became clear: the outpouring of energy revealed what Silberschlag had meant when he touted a "healing" feel during his interview.

Franz Strauss's *Introduction, Theme, and Variations*, while impeccably and passionately played by Willinger and Nathaniel Silberschlag, felt a bit long juxtaposed with the gospel numbers. It nonetheless found the hornist once again radiant and in full control of the instrument, virtuosic to the end.

The program concluded with a fitting expansion to a (socially distanced) community: a multi-tracked reading of Eric Whitacre's choral *Sleep*, arranged for horn octet and played by an illustrious cohort of Silberschlag's colleagues and teachers. The performance, sponsored by instrument-maker C.G. Conn, featured a sound long exclusive to the horn section of The Cleveland Orchestra: that of Conn's model 8D, secure in its low range and soaring high. Whitacre's signature, glowing dissonances allow listeners to attend more closely to the blend of tone qualities, a treat in this time of blaring speech, electronic noise, and too much silence.

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