

Review**Cleveland Orchestra with Alan Gilbert (March 21)**

by Daniel Hathaway



How much difference does a change of conductors make? Quite a lot, when you have an ensemble as cooperative and malleable as The Cleveland Orchestra, and when a big, sprawly work like Mahler's seventh symphony is involved.

Last weekend, New York Philharmonic music director Alan Gilbert returned to Severance Hall, where he had served as conducting assistant and assistant conductor from 1994-1997, to fill in for the ailing French maestro Pierre Boulez and to provide a fascinating contrast between what one conductor hypothetically might have done and what another one actually did.

A Boulez interpretation of Mahler 7 — purely speculative, of course — would probably have subjected the work to a thorough and rigorous formal analysis, would likely have mined the score for inner details and placed them importantly in the context of larger structures, and almost certainly would have observed every tempo change, rhythmic subtlety and dynamic level Mahler obsessively prescribed.

Gilbert's interpretation was exciting, replete with stunning climaxes and dramatic gestures, but the conductor chose to take a high-altitude view of the piece, smoothing over its many transitions and scarcely pausing to breathe between its wildly contrasting sections. But homogenization took the edge off passages that were meant to sound shrill and out of place. A narrow range of dynamics — from *mezzo forte* to *fortissimo* — sapped soft moments of their mystery and too many undifferentiated climaxes eventually began to weary the ear. And the number of imprecise attacks during the course of the symphony was eyebrow-raising.

Mahler 7 got off to an inauspicious start when someone's mumbling in the front rows caught Gilbert's attention just as he was raising his baton (he turned around to see what was happening and an audible "shut up!" from an audience member quelled the disturbance).

Mahler 7 came off well in the end, largely thanks to The Cleveland Orchestra's splendid soloists — too many to name in fear of leaving someone out, but the standouts were Thomas Klaber, who distinguished himself on the tenor horn in the first movement, Richard King, who was marvelous both in horn solos and duets in the second (*Night Mu-*

sic No. 1) and tubist Yasuhito Sugiyama, who was brilliant in his rare moment in the spotlight during the scherzo. And it was fun to watch the oldest and youngest members of the percussion section, Richard Weiner (former principal, now retired) and Jacob Nissly (currently principal), swinging four big cowbells in the final bars of the symphony.

Mahler 7 really doesn't need a companion piece, but Gilbert followed through on Boulez's plan to begin the concert with Ravel's complete ballet music for *Ma Mère l'Oye* (for those who know the suite in its original version for piano four hands, the full ballet adds two movements at the beginning and transitions in between).

Who can resist Ravel's charm in these tales from Mother Goose? Alan Gilbert led an effective if rather breathless reading that would have gained character from being a bit more laid back. Again, soloists were outstanding — Joella Jones on celesta, Jonathan Sherwin on contrabassoon (a charming Beast), Peter Otto as concertmaster for the evening, Robert Walters on English horn, Joshua Smith on flute, Frank Rosenwein on oboe, Franklin Cohen on clarinet and Trina Struble on harp — all telling their stories eloquently while giving the ballet music the authentic flavors of France.

Published on clevelandclassical.com March 26, 2013