

Review**Cleveland Orchestra and Chorus in Haydn's *The Seasons* (April 25)**

by Daniel Hathaway



The Cleveland Orchestra Chorus has had a lot on its plate this month, preparing and performing two major works just two weeks apart. This fine, all-volunteer ensemble — now celebrating its sixtieth anniversary — handily swapped the faux-medieval pastiche of *Carmina Burana* for the witty, cultured music of *The Seasons*, turning in a splendid performance of Haydn's underappreciated, second oratorio under the baton of Franz Welser-Möst on Thursday evening, April 25 in Severance Hall — with a little help from The Cleveland Orchestra and three top-notch soloists.

The suddenly-flowering trees out front augured well for the occasion, which opened with an orchestral introduction depicting “the passage from winter to spring”. That was followed closely by the choral caveat: “*Do not rejoice all too soon / for often, wrapped in mists, / winter creeps back again and strews / on blossom and bud his rigid poison.*” Apparently, what goes for Cleveland also goes for Vienna. Though all four seasons cycled by onstage, Spring prevailed outside on Thursday night.

In setting Baron von Swieten's adaptation of a lengthy text by Scots poet James Thomson, Haydn planned a major scene as the centerpiece of each season, calling on the chorus to play joyful, grateful countryfolk in *Spring*, storm-frightened villagers in *Summer*, hunters and wine tipplers in *Autumn* and spinners and storytellers gathered toastily around the fire in *Winter*. Prepared by Robert Porco, the COC was wonderfully malleable in its changing roles, sounding gracious, ominous, hearty, bibulous or pious as the libretto required, yet always well-balanced and faultlessly attentive to diction. The several choral fugues were strong, clear and confident.

Soprano Malin Hartelius, tenor Maximilian Schmitt and bass-baritone Luca Pisaroni formed a dream team of soloists, blending beautifully in trios and bringing presence and character to the seasonally changing roles of Hanne, Lukas and Simon. Hartelius was particularly charming as the narrator of the Winter tale, *Ein Mädchen, das auf Ehre hielt*.

Welser-Möst paced *The Seasons* like the fine opera conductor he is, moving the story along but relaxing the flow when required, dialing up tempos to a dizzy pitch in the hunting dog aria and the wine song and pointing up little details of Haydn's clever writing as he went along. To his credit, he understated the composer's fleeting representations of quails, crickets and frogs — cute, but not something to dwell upon.

The orchestra vividly demonstrated Haydn's skills as an orchestrator in a magisterial performance full of nuance and detail. The addition of two extra horns on stage left for the hunting scene provided a terrific stereo effect, and hornist Richard King, flutist Joshua Smith and oboist Frank Rosenwein contributed glowing solos throughout. Timpanist Paul Yancich produced realistic muffled thunder by passing his sticks all over the drum head. A special nod to the violins for playing thousands of fast notes with verve and accuracy, and to fortepianist Joela Jones for stylish continuo playing.

The only element missing from this engaging performance — at least until the end of each half — was audience response. Under the unspoken “no applause between movements” rule, brilliant show-stoppers like the hunting and wine drinking scenes were met with an unnatural silence rather than spontaneous approval. One of the most thrilling concerts I've ever attended was a performance of *The Seasons* led by Roger Norrington at the Boston Early Music Festival in 1987. Before the downbeat, Norrington invited the crowd to get into the skin of an early nineteenth-century audience and applaud or cheer whenever we really liked something. We obliged, and that turned into an interactive experience that I've never forgotten.

On the other hand, one type of audience response we could have done without was first a watch chime then a long, hideous ring tone — both from the dress circle — that interrupted Hanne's recitative in *Spring* and prompted a testy comment from the podium about “turning off your machinery.”

Photo by Roger Mastroiani of a previous TCO-COC performance.

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