

Review

Oberlin Artist Recital Series: The Cleveland Orchestra with Gianandrea Noseda & Massimo La Rosa (February 8)

by Daniel Hathaway



The Cleveland Orchestra's 211th visit to the Oberlin Artist Recital Series in Finney Chapel last Friday evening featured two debuts: Gianandrea Noseda's as guest conductor, and principal trombonist Massimo La Rosa's as concerto soloist. Nino Rota's sunny *Trombone Concerto* shared the program with two more emotionally complicated Russian works by Rachmaninoff and Prokofiev.

1942 was his 1907 tone poem, *The Isle of the Dead*, based on a symbolist painting by Arnold Böcklin so famous that the Swiss artist made five versions of it and reproductions, said Vladimir Nabokov, could be found hanging in every Berlin home. Rachmaninoff saw only a black and white photograph of the strange *Toteninsel* with its mysterious pair of figures in a boat, its rocky mausoleum and tall yew trees, before writing his work, but it took hold of his imagination strongly enough to inspire a 20-minute piece.



Noseda invited the large audience into the murky scenario with a hushed introduction, a lulling, irregular *barcarolle* pattern in 5/8 time that established itself so firmly in the ear that when 3/4 time eventually took over, the more regular meter sounded strange. A brass chorale announced an orchestral frenzy capped by a huge, rhythmical climax. A funereal cortège led to a reprise of the opening music. Though Rachmaninoff's original view

of *Toteninsel* was necessarily monochromatic, his orchestration is shot through with color, sometimes muted, sometimes vivid. Noseda and the orchestra played it with fine attention to pace and balance.

The musical legacy of Nino Rota, an extraordinarily prolific Italian composer of opera, choral, orchestral and chamber music who died in 1979, has been dominated by his success with film scores, notably those he wrote for Franco Zeffirelli and Francis Ford Coppola. It was delightful to hear one of his non-cinematic works tonight, the 1966 *Trombone Concerto*, played so brilliantly by Massimo La Rosa.

"I'd do everything I could to give everyone a moment of happiness," Rota once said. "That's what's at the heart of my music." And indeed, that was the prevailing emotion in his brief, pithy and instantly attractive concerto for an instrument that doesn't get many moments in front of the orchestra.



Rota has a masterful way of spinning whole movements out of single ideas, sometimes very basic ones. The opening *Allegro giusto* began with leapy, fanfarish material which found a promising rhythmic groove, then turned into a wistful little dance. The *Lento, ben ritmato* was based on a short-short-long rhythm that burrowed in but never outstayed its welcome. The final *Allegro moderato* gave the solo trombone the idea of a descending scale against repeated notes in the orchestra (strangely reminiscent of the opening of

Mendelssohn's *Italian Symphony*). Other rhythmic motives took over before the music calmed into a sweet trombone aria against broken chords and ended in an outburst of brassy élan.

Though the concerto lasted less than fifteen minutes, Rota's music had a lot to say and La Rosa brought the message across eloquently with strong and cheerful support from Nosedá and the orchestra. His tone was always handsome, especially in the lyrical slow movement, his technique flawless in the more athletic passages. In La Rosa's capable hands, the trombone can be fully as eloquent a concerto soloist as the cello (composers, take note!).

No emotion ever runs pure in a large Prokofiev work, as Nosedá and The Cleveland Orchestra proved in the second half with his sixth and last symphony. Dark moods are penetrated by darts of light and flights of humor, happiness is mitigated by intimations of gloom. Composed two years after the end of the second World War and after the composer's heart attack, fall and concussion, the sixth has plenty of mixed emotions to convey from its shocking opening brass razzes to its abrupt conclusion.

The first movement continues on with striking conversations between piano, brass and percussion, a sinister march and a luminous horn solo. Piccolo and E-flat clarinet top a perfect din of screaming winds in the *Largo*, which subsides into eerie comments from piano and celesta before the keening resumes. The third movement *Vivace* follows the rondo-like ground plan and affective instability of most Prokofiev finales. You can find almost anything here, but no idea or emotion sticks around for very long.

The Cleveland Orchestra played with exceptional brilliance, due in no small part to Gianandrea Noseda's kinetic presence on the podium. He flailed at the air like a timpanist, he did hip-swiveling dance steps, he reached higher and higher as phrases mounted upward until it seemed as though his arms were growing longer each time. What might have seemed self-indulgent in other conductors became completely genuine with Noseda, so deeply was he immersed in the music and eager to transmit it through the orchestra to the audience. In time-honored Oberlin style, the ovation at the end began with clapping hands and escalated to stamping feet.

Photos by Roger Mastroianni courtesy of the Oberlin Conservatory of Music.

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