

Review

Cleveland Orchestra: Fridays @ 7 with Bela Fleck, Banjo Virtuoso (December 7)

by Alexandra A. Vago



The Cleveland Orchestra's KeyBank Fridays@7 concert series began in 2009 as a way to create a new concert experience for new patrons and introduce current patrons to musics of the world. As part of this season's series, Giancarlo Guerrero led the Cleveland Orchestra in an exhilarating exhibition of American music for a nearly sold-out Severance Hall on Friday, December 7.

Fridays@7 is really three concert experiences in one. The 6:00 pm pre-concert in the Reinberger Chamber Hall featured folk music from Eastern Europe performed by Harmonia. The main event highlighted American music with *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* by Adams, *An American in Paris* by Gershwin, and Béla Fleck's *Concerto for Banjo and Orchestra*. The Bogomolny-Kozerefski Grand Foyer housed the after-party, which showcased contemporary music from New Orleans performed by Mark Mullins, trombone; Roland Guerin, bass; and Johnny Vidacovich, drums.

Although Fleck was not available to sign CDs after Friday's concert, as an added bonus for those who stayed for the after-party, he joined the trio and subsequently invited his wife, Abigail Washburn, to sing with them, too. Although the after-party had a life of its own – the sizzle and sass of contemporary New Orleans, with an infectious rendition of "Iko Iko" bursting through the walls and halls of Severance – the gem of the evening was Fleck's *Concerto for Banjo and Orchestra*.

The 7:00 concert began with John Adams's *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*, which functions agreeably as a sonic *amuse-bouche* in this abridged concert format. Adams said, in reference to this composition and its title, "You know how it is when someone asks you to ride in a terrific sports car, and then you wish you hadn't." Of pop culture relevance, it is interesting to note that *Back to the Future*, made in 1985, is a movie that features a DeLorean time machine driven by Dr. Emmett Brown and Marty McFly; Adams wrote *Short Ride* in 1986. Perhaps the movie connection is only a coincidence, however, an incessant and sadistic woodblock immediately garnered the audience's attention in the *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*.

While Gershwin's *American in Paris* possessed precise and crisp playing, it seemed to be a bit truncated because of its quickened pace.



Making his Cleveland Orchestra debut, Béla Fleck dazzled the audience with his *Concerto for Banjo and Orchestra* in three movements. Considering Fleck himself claimed to have no real orchestration experience, and the *Banjo Concerto* is the first piece he has orchestrated, he seems to possess an intuitive ear for it. The result is an organic color palette of the elements: earth, wind, fire, and water. While some may perceive aspects of the concerto in terms of Minimalism, Fleck seems to organize and manipulate the material using layered ostinato, or repeating patterns that morph and transform.

The concerto collectively draws us into an aural excursion that forces us to perceive the banjo as something other than our pre-conceived notions of what a banjo is and is not. Especially haunting was the use of chimes at three different points in the second movement; each seemed to signify a metamorphosis or transformation. Overall, Fleck created a sonic artifact that reflects his experiences and musical influences from jazz, classical, "blu-bop," and the African origins of the banjo.

After three curtain calls, Béla performed "God Rest Ye Merry Gentleman," and concluded with a heartwarming rendition, replete with a "wait-for-it" grin, of the Beverly Hillbillies theme music.

With its well placed *at sign*, Fridays@7 becomes a symbol to harness the hip and youthful generation and the tech savvy, too. It points to "where the party's at." If you want to know "where the party's at," the next KeyBank Fridays@7 series concert is on January 18, 2013. Franz Welser-Möst will lead the orchestra in a program featuring the Beethoven *Violin Concerto* with Joshua Bell, and Bartók's *Dance Suite*. The after-party features the Pedrito Martinez Group performing Afro-Cuban influenced pieces that incorporate Spanish lyrics and improvisation.

Published on clevelandclassical.com December 11, 2012