

Review**Cleveland Orchestra at Blossom: All-Wagner
with Christine Brewer and Alan Held (July 13)**

by Robert Rollin



Though not something one would expect for a summer festival blast off, Franz Welser-Möst turned the all-Wagner evening at Blossom on Saturday, July 13 into a great success. Having two remarkably talented soloists didn't hurt the concert, a powerful mélange of instrumental music and justly renowned vocal chestnuts, but above all, Welser-Möst's approach to Wagner made the evening a truly special event. Among connoisseurs, the three operatic excerpts, each preceded by large instrumental segments, are

considered the very best of Wagner.

Welser-Möst's plan was to avoid over-sentimentalizing the music by keeping the tempo moving well, and by not over-fixating on the music's wealth of details. Music theoreticians can spend hours arguing about harmonic analysis and non-chord tones in Wagner, but for the listener, the large scale lines and buildup to climaxes are of far greater import. Welser-Möst kept these elements limpidly apparent and guided orchestra and soloists into exemplary performances.

The evening's highlight was the *Prelude and Love-Death* from *Tristan and Isolde*. The *Prelude*, the subject of many Musical Form classes, is a great work because it illustrates musical love-longing, employing advanced chromatic harmony. The piece rarely lands in a particular key long enough to truly establish it. Welser-Möst opened the *Prelude* with a strongly moving tempo, faster than that of some, but never stopped lovingly shading the speed and dynamics. He often rescued what appeared to be a long pregnant pause by pushing forward immediately thereafter. The many beautifully nuanced interchanges among woodwinds and strings pushed forward to the darkly beautiful conclusion in the double basses.

Soprano Christine Brewer started the *Love-Death* with the remarkably dark and fully resonant vocal color that has made her one of the world's greatest sopranos. Though she varied her dynamics and phrasing greatly, Brewer had the remarkable ability never to allow the orchestral texture to overcome her, even in the fullest of textures. Her power and sensitivity, along with Welser-Möst's steady conducting, made the performance fabulous.

Bass-baritone Alan Held was excellent in *Wotan's Farewell* and the *Magic Fire Music* from *Die Walküre*. Here, Brewer, as Wotan, must part from his daughter and punish her for her intervening in mortal affairs. The scene is a musical soliloquy showing Wotan's inner thoughts and his regret. He softens the blow by making Brünnhilde a mortal and surrounding her with a ring of fire. The large orchestra accompanied beautifully, though at times Held's low voice struggled to be heard above the huge orchestral texture. Notwithstanding, his beautiful vocal quality and expression made the performance a treat. The orchestral horn playing was exceptional.

Brewer returned to close the program with *Brünnhilde's Immolation* from *Götterdämmerung*, the last *Ring* opera. Two marvelously performed instrumental numbers from the preceding two acts, including Siegfried's funeral music, served as prelude to Brewer's performance. Here, Siegfried has been betrayed and killed by Hagen, son of the dwarf Alberich who had put the original curse on the ring. Brünnhilde laments Siegfried's death and prepares for her immolation on a great funeral pyre. She returns the ring to the Rheinmaidens, the original owners from whom Alberich stole it in *Das Rheingold*, the first of the four *Ring* operas. Her death ends the reign of the Gods, as the flames consume Valhalla. Wagner's orchestra is as enormous as it gets, and he takes the opportunity to reprise many of the *Ring's* leitmotifs. The performance was terrific.

Brewer's diction was nothing less than phenomenal. She continued to project impeccably, each consonant perfectly enunciated. Pleasing exchanges among the cello and violin section supported her opening, as the orchestra built to a full *tutti*. Siegfried's wonderful horn call appeared, and the trumpet played two beautiful solos. The music displayed wonderful contrapuntal skills worthy of the best of *Meistersinger*. Welser-Möst controlled the flow effectively and Brewer shared her prodigious talents with exceptional clarinet and oboe solos.

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