

Review: Cleveland Orchestra with Herbert Blomstedt & Mark Kosower (April 17)

by Robert Rollin



Last Thursday evening, April 17, The Cleveland Orchestra under guest conductor Herbert Blomstedt's masterful hand performed a stunningly beautiful concert of romantic music. The program featured two wonderful Slavic works.

The evening's highlight was the performance of the Antonin Dvořák *Cello Concerto in b, Opus 104* with Mark Kosower, the orchestra's principal cellist, as soloist. The piece is one of the great romantic concertos.

The opening *Allegro's* orchestral exposition sparkled with gorgeous solos by Frank Rosenwein, principal oboe, Michael Mayhew, associate principal French horn and Franklin Cohen, principal clarinet. The tutti grew in intensity as it approached Kosower's first passages. The rapport among soloist, conductor, and orchestra was apparent in the very first soloist entrance. The performance had a remarkable clarity, and all the cello's rapid sixteenth notes were apparent even when the accompanying textures were thick.

Kosower's clear, bright tone and Blomstedt's supple and well-prepared conducting helped maintain the wonderful balance. After an orchestral transition, the second theme in D, the relative major, emerged in the solo cello like a sudden ray of sunshine. This lush romantic melody gradually ascended to the high range. Lovely solos in principal flute and oboe followed.

The second movement, *Adagio ma non troppo*, was equally beautiful and included a marvelously idyllic principal clarinet solo. The intense middle section moved to the parallel minor key and recalled Dvořák's own song, *Lasst mich allein (Let Me Be Alone) op. 82, No. 1*. This was a memorial to his sister-in-law in the form of her favorite of the composer's songs. Then the first idea returned and the orchestra's terrific woodwind section was spot on in intonation and character. Rapid high string passages created

intermittent contrast, and an incredibly exquisite dialogue between Kosower and Joshua Smith, the principal flute, was entrancing.

The Finale, *Allegro molto*, continued the performance's high caliber in the soloist's delicate individual pairings with flute, oboe and clarinet. The form departed from a typical rondo by including a cyclical return to the first movement's opening theme and a final reference to the op. 82, No. 1 song and to Dvořák's sister-in-law. Thereafter, a great concertmaster solo, fine brass passages accompanied by timpani, interesting muted horn timbres, and an excellent clarinet solo led to a fast tutti close. The remarkable rapport among soloist, conductor, and orchestra produced a performance of the highest quality.

The performance of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's *Symphony No. 6* was equally outstanding. The first movement's introductory *Adagio* led almost immediately to *Allegro non troppo* and a faster recurrence of the opening theme. The work's somber nature presented itself from the opening low register first bassoon solo and its overlapping divided string bass accompaniment. Divided violas and cellos continued the uniquely dark quality, as did similar low-lying divided parts in flutes and clarinets. The string and woodwind anacrusic sixteenth notes lent the theme a driving quality that grew as more forces entered. The many crescendos and diminuendos supported this effectively.

The gorgeous contrasting second theme is a beloved melody to concert audiences. Notable moments included lovely contrapuntal duets between flute and bassoon and clarinet and bassoon principals. The extended development dwelled on the surging emotional second theme. An especially expressive clarinet solo returned in the recapitulation.

The middle two movements moved to lighter moods. The second, marked *Allegro con grazia*, was a surprisingly graceful waltz using an inventive, asymmetrical, five-four meter rarely encountered in romantic music. The third, marked *Allegro molto vivace*, was also rhythmically imaginative, and combined a four square march-like tune with a twelve-eight accompaniment. The resultant cross-rhythms were infectious and lent the movement a vivacious sprightliness immediately appreciated by the audience.

The *Finale* returns to the first movement's opening mood, but feels even more anguished and sad. The slow but intense tempos; use of the stopped horns; the return to divided woodwind and string parts; the contrasting brass treatment of chorale-like textures; and the contrapuntal focus, all add up to a passionate response to death's looming shadow. Tchaikovsky died just nine days after conducting the premiere. The Cleveland Orchestra performance was exceptional and touching.

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