

**Review: Cleveland Orchestra at Blossom —
Mitchell in for Skrowaczewski, with
pianist Francesco Piemontesi (July 20)**

by Daniel Hathaway



Last Sunday evening was meant to mark the historic return of the 90-year-old, Polish-born conductor Stanislaw Skrowaczewski to Blossom after a hiatus of thirty-two years. It was historic alright, but for another reason.

Skrowaczewski, who first conducted The Cleveland Orchestra in 1958 at George Szell's invitation, was sidelined by an illness and assistant conductor Brett Mitchell was tapped late in the week to replace him. Mitchell did himself proud leading scores by Weber, Mozart and Shostakovich on a night that will no doubt be inscribed in the annals of Assistant Conductors' Big Opportunities.

Summer concerts don't generally come with abundant rehearsals, so Mitchell and the orchestra probably had very little time together to scope out this repertory. The big mountain to scale was Shostakovich's fifth symphony, a work Skrowaczewski had conducted in his Cleveland Orchestra debut more than five decades earlier (when spies from the then Minneapolis Symphony were in the audience on the lookout for a new music director). Under the

circumstances, the results Mitchell and the orchestra achieved on Sunday were amazing.

Though Mitchell played it safe with some tempos — the second and third movements seemed a bit deliberate — he led a clean, expressive performance which had both its thrilling and chilling moments, as well as an abundance of alluring details.

Spectacular playing by the whole brass section — especially by the horns, and the low brass — illuminated Shostakovich's rich, moody score. Wonderful solos by hornist Michael Mayhew (fourth movement), harpist Tina Struble (end of the third) and concertmaster Peter Otto shone out like jewels in the darkness. The finale was breathtaking in its sweep and sense of triumph.

The evening began with Carl Maria von Weber's *Freischütz Overture*. Its somewhat tentative beginning needed both more confidence and suspense, but once the tunes came along, momentum took hold and the piece sang out with appealing lyricism and amassed rousing climaxes. The horn section — essential for an opera about hunting — was pure gold.



Mozart's final piano concerto, No. 27 in B-flat, seems to step away from the more fully-orchestrated, symphonic concertos that preceded it, but its resulting intimacy found its perfect match in the clean, thoughtful, disciplined and subtly expressive playing of Swiss-Italian pianist Francesco Piemontesi. Though the opening orchestral *tutti* got off to a shaky start, Piemontesi was a model of pianistic elegance from his first entrance to the last statement of the catchy rondo theme in the finale. And beneath the surface of his restraint was a welcome reservoir of warmth and color.

Brett Mitchell and the players were attentive, understated partners who let Piemontesi sail out easily over the orchestra. When it came time for them to shine in the slow movement, the wind band offered up a particularly lovely blend. The audience responded warmly to the concerto and Piemontesi responded with something completely different: Debussy's explosive and eventful prelude, *Fireworks (Feux d'artifice)*.

Uninvited, perhaps, but feeling completely at home with Mozart, the birds of Blossom added their own voices to the concerto. But neither stentorian twittering, nor the booming of Blossom's famous pavilion beam, nor what sounded like a bottle dropped on cement, broke the concentration of the musicians on Sunday night.

Following the Shostakovich, the large audience (thanks particularly to the Cleveland Foundation, who celebrated an anniversary by distributing a few thousand lawn tickets that night) gave Brett Mitchell and the orchestra a huge ovation. When Mitchell returned

to the stage for the last time and the orchestra declined to stand to share the applause, the maestro of the hour urged the concertmaster to his feet and made the players join him. A special moment in an event to remember!

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