

## Cleveland Orchestra at Blossom: Mozart with Matthew Halls (August 9)

by Robert Rollin



On Saturday evening, August 9, the Blossom Festival presented an exemplary Cleveland Orchestra Mozart concert under the gifted young British conductor, Matthew Halls, making his debut with the group. The Oxford-educated musician first became known as a keyboard player and conductor of early music. Since then he has come to prominence as Director of the Oregon Bach Festival and through appearances with major professional orchestras and opera companies in Europe,

Australia, and North America.

The entire concert was a delight, thanks to the orchestra's wonderful talent and to Halls's remarkably colorful dynamics and sensitive control of tempi. Notwithstanding his youthfulness, Halls showed mature and outstanding interpretive skills, lending grace and beauty to the entire concert.

His choice of the old chestnut, *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, K.525 (*A Little Night Music*) brought the need to provide a fresh imaginative reading, and that is exactly what he produced. He made the opening delicate and refined *Allegro* especially gorgeous through gracefully sensitive arm motions that allowed for minute, subtle tempo fluctuations. He also deftly shaded the dynamics when gradual crescendos and diminuendos were required. The strings responded beautifully.

The *Andante* (subtitled *Romance*) came off very well and provided a sprightly movement that maintained audience interest. The contrapuntal texture scintillated with lively upper register trills. The moving tempo never flagged.

The *Menuetto*, marked *Allegretto*, had charming duple groupings at the end of the first answering phrase. Subsequently the first violins played a contrasting theme in beautiful,

continuous eighth notes. Halls skillfully controlled the tempo with tiny, tasteful *ritardandos* followed by returns to the predominating motion.

The closing fast *Rondo* was stunningly engaging because of its wonderfully complex phrasing. Viola and cello lines were at times swallowed up in the fast motion and might have been better balanced.

After translating Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* into Russian in 1884, Tchaikovsky decided to create an orchestral suite made up of short Mozart pieces. This became his charming Suite No. 4, subtitled *Mozartiana*. The first movement source was *Eine Kleine Gigue (A Little Jig)*, K574. Its stretto canonic treatment brings to mind Baroque counterpoint and the music of Bach and Handel. The performance brought out Tchaikovsky's crisp and clear orchestration effectively.

The second movement, Minuet, though hinting at the earlier era of the majestic French Overture, contains a good deal of chromaticism and harmony with many non-chord tones. Tchaikovsky's beautiful orchestration was faithful to the *gallant* unison passages and contributed some particularly lovely woodwind material.

The third movement, Prayer, recognized by singers as taken from Mozart's last motet, *Ave verum corpus*, K. 618, was a surprising departure from the keyboard sources. Using Liszt's piano transcription, Tchaikovsky employed extensive harp passages that lent a surprisingly Romantic mood to the piece — in sharp contrast to its original. The harp and the use of small cymbals added fresh color splashes to the movement.

The final *Theme and Variations*, employing a melody that Mozart originally borrowed from his contemporary, Gluck, imaginatively translates rapid virtuosic keyboard passages into the full orchestra. Sparkling clarinet solo writing, effective bassoon and low string doublings, high register flute trills, interchanges between horns and trumpets, celesta combined with string pizzicati, and extensive solo violin passages played with great skill, creativity, and élan by concertmaster Yoko Moore, all combined to make this movement ingratiating and exquisite.

The performance of *Symphony No. 36 (Linz) in C Major*, K. 425 was exceptional. Mozart dashed it off and rehearsed it in five days in response to the local count's kind hospitality. Halls controlled dynamics beautifully in the slow introduction, a relative rarity in Mozart's symphonies. In the subsequent *Spiritoso* section he prepared for suddenly loud passages by first lowering the prevailing volume. This careful approach made the dynamic changes all the more effective. The movement had lovely soloistic treatment of oboes, bassoons, and horns.

The *Andante* was replete with interesting phrasing, and the *Menuetto*, playful and terse. The sprightly, almost hectic *Presto*, containing a multitude of themes broken into short figures, was performed with panache.

The attractive and short overture to *Idomeneo*, an early Mozart opera, sparkled as the concert's opening work.

*Due to a scheduling mixup, two writers separately reviewed this performance. A second review by guest correspondent Kelly Ferjutz has also been posted.*

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