

Cleveland Orchestra previews its European tour repertoire at Summers @ Severance (August 29)

by Timothy Robson



As a prelude to its three-week European tour, Franz Welser-Möst and the Cleveland Orchestra previewed some of their tour repertoire in the third of the 2014 Summers @ Severance concerts on Friday, August 29. This was no summertime “orchestra-lite” concert, but featured two demanding and arresting works by Jörg Widmann, the

orchestra’s former Daniel R. Lewis Young Composer Fellow, as well as that monument of the orchestral repertoire, Johannes Brahms’s *Symphony No. 1 in C minor, op. 68*. Severance Hall was well filled with a very diverse audience of Cleveland Orchestra fans.

Jörg Widmann’s music brilliantly combines skillful use of orchestration with modernist compositional techniques, at the same time retaining just enough references to recognizable musical styles to make his music appealing to a wide audience. His *Lied* (“Song,” 2003–09) is a 20-some minute fantasy based on Franz Schubert’s melodic style. Although there are no direct Schubert quotations, the thematic material is often diatonic and sounds vaguely familiar. But the overall aspect of the work is Mahlerian, with its use of a very large orchestra (although, intriguingly for a modern work, only one percussionist) and gargantuan musical development, pitting timbre and color against melody. The melody often moves independently of a seemingly remote accompaniment. There are string chorales, very sparse pizzicato strings, a single note on the accordion combined with an ethereal bowed note on the vibraphone, followed by a fortissimo blast from the brass. The pulse is slow and cloud-like; this is a glimpse of Schubert through a gauzy haze. The last gesture of the work is a single, unearthly note on the vibraphone.

Widmann’s concerto *Flûte en suite* (for solo flute and orchestra groupings) was written in 2010–11 on commission from the Cleveland Orchestra for the orchestra’s virtuoso principal flute Joshua Smith. In the eight-movement work, Widmann takes on the

conventions of the Baroque dance suite: short movements in a variety of styles modeled on Baroque dances (Allemande, Sarabande, Courante). To Baroque performers, the titles of the movements would imply style and tempo appropriate to the dance being performed. Just as Johann Sebastian Bach elaborated on the dance conventions for his suites and partitas, Widmann has broadened his view of the dance styles by creating an individual instrumental grouping for each movement. The composer uses a chamber-orchestra-sized string section, but with a full complement of winds and brass, plus a large battery of percussion.

In his notes for *Flûte en suite*, Widmann extols the beauty and warmth of Joshua Smith's low notes. That color was exploited in the first movement, *Allemande*, for solo flute with the accompaniment of the orchestral flute section on alto and bass flutes, plus piccolo. In the *Sarabande*, traditionally a slow-moving dance with complex steps, the solo flute was accompanied by solo bassoon, oboe and violin, later joined by the larger orchestra, and ending with long, sustained notes in high strings. Some of the phrase-ending cadences came almost directly out of Baroque music. *Choral I* featured long notes in the orchestra supporting melismatic solo passages of great fantasy, dynamic range and tessitura, with a closing rising glissando to nothing. The *Courante* was a flute arabesque, over plucked and tapped strings with the harpsichord playing independently, as if accompanying a Baroque suite gone mad.

After the *Chorale II*, with the flute again in its low range accompanied by brass chorales and piccolos in a jaunty, high-range march and sparkling percussion, the sixth-movement *Barcarolle* was haunting and folk-like, evoking night and slowly lapping water, accompanied mostly by celesta and tuned percussion. A brilliant *Cadenza* that displayed Smith's virtuosity, sometimes requiring vocalization as well as standard technique, moved directly into the final *Badinerie*, an absurdist fantasy on Bach's movement of the same title from the *Orchestral Suite*, BWV 1067. There were numerous allusions to other works (a phrase from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* passed by, fleetingly), making for a surreal, closing romp.

I heard one of the performances in the premiere series of *Flûte en suite* in 2011 (pictured above), and both Joshua Smith and the orchestra have added a level of comfort and lustre to their performance. Smith has burnished his reputation as a virtuoso soloist worthy of comparison to the best in the world. Both of the Widmann works on this program should be repeated and incorporated into the orchestra's regular playlist.

Johannes Brahms's First Symphony is meat and potatoes of the orchestral repertoire, indestructible, and capable of revealing new insight in every performance. The Cleveland Orchestra is in great shape for their European tour. The first movement was surging, urgent, dramatic. Franz Welser-Möst favored a brisk tempo after the opening introduction. The main body of the movement seemed sometimes on the verge of being hectic, robbing it of some of its dignity. The highlights of the second movement were the

numerous orchestral solos throughout, including a wonderful moment in which the violin and horn are combined.

The third movement, which is, notably, not a scherzo, again seemed rushed, so the abundant melody was often more breathless than lyrical. The fourth movement was the highlight, with balances and tempi just right. Joshua Smith, ever the good soldier, was back in his principal flute perch in the center of the orchestra, to play a beautiful solo passage in the movement. We should expect good reports from the European press as the tour commences.

The closing ovation brought an encore from Johann Strauss Jr.'s *Ritter Pasman*. After a slow introduction, the rousing Csardás made at least this listener want to clap along.

As part of the Summers @ Severance concerts, the management set up bars and food stands on the front terrace of Severance Hall. The party, which began at 6 pm, continued outside with DJ music after the concert.

Photo by Roger Mastroianni.

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