

Cleveland Orchestra with James Gaffigan and Yulia Van Doren (October 23)

by Daniel Hathaway



Pietism and fatalism inspired the disquieting poetic images that Soprano Yulia Van Doren and the Cleveland Orchestra and Chorus presented in works by Johann Sebastian Bach and Johannes Brahms last Thursday night in Severance Hall. Those depressing thoughts might have put a damper on the proceedings, had not the music in both cases been so appealing.

Bach composed the cantata, *Mein Herze schwimmt im Blut*, at Weimar in 1714 to a gory, masochistic libretto by Georg Christian Lehms that is embarrassing to quote in modern English. Bach set it dramatically, and in some movements even joyously, for soprano, oboe and strings. Replacing indisposed violinist Hilary Hahn, Russian-American soprano Yulia Van Doren and guest conductor James Gaffigan opened Thursday's concert with a lucid and expressive performance of the cantata, which stood in for a pair of Bach violin concertos.

Van Doren was up against a string section of nearly forty players. The plush, symphonic sound they created in some of the arias occasionally engulfed her, but her bright, supple voice was well suited to the piece. She carried well in more lightly scored movements — recitatives, the aria with oboe obbligato, and the chorale with viola solo — though crisper diction would have made it easier to follow the German text. Gaffigan shaped an expressive performance, assisted by principal oboe Frank Rosenwein and principal viola Robert Vernon, who played their lines with a fine sense of style and phrasing. Rosenwein moved to the front of the stage for the first aria, then back into the orchestra for the rest, including the ultimately happy, gigue-like finale.

Brahms set similarly desolate verse by Friedrich Hölderlin to music in his *Schicksalslied* or “Song of Destiny.” This time, rather than groveling under the judgment of an angry God, humanity realizes that the gods are merely indifferent to mortals and their fate. Writing for large chorus and full orchestra, Brahms adorned Hölderlin's words with some of his most wistful music.

Shifting gears after last week's Bach B-minor Mass performances, The Cleveland Orchestra Chorus sang with luscious, blended tone that melded wonderfully with strings and winds at all dynamic levels. Gaffigan created a palpable sense of the inevitable in the orchestral prelude then unleashed his forces dramatically when Hölderlin's humanity compared itself to "water tossed from cliff to cliff, for years into unfathomable depths." The chorus sits out the brief postlude, ignored by the unfeeling gods, who go on with their blissful, weightless existence.



Mendelssohn's "Reformation Symphony" restored a measure of hope after intermission. Composed in honor of the tricentenary of the Protestant Reformation, this rather brief work is full of health and cheerfulness, even if its opening movement suggests conflict. After a buoyant scherzo and a tuneful slow movement, the solo flute introduces what might be called the theme song of the German Protestant movement, *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*, then all is triumph to the end as the orchestra takes up the theme, whole or in fragments. The winds, given extra gravitas by contrabassoon and bass trombone, sounded noble.

James Gaffigan found more excitement in the symphony's finale than most conductors manage to uncover, and he fanned its orchestral flames with enthusiasm and purpose. If the tone got a little edgy and balances occasionally went awry, that was all in the service of assuring a gripping performance of a not-so-often performed work.

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