

Contemporary Youth Orchestra at Waetjen Auditorium (December 7)

by Mike Telin



For the past nineteen seasons, Liza Grossman has been inspiring young musicians to become enthused about contemporary music. On Sunday evening, December 7, in Cleveland State University's Waetjen Auditorium, the fruits of her tireless labor were fully realized in a glorious concert that began the Contemporary Youth Orchestra's twentieth anniversary season.

The concert honored Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Bernard Rands, who tapped Grossman while she was still a student as being a person who had a knack for teaching contemporary music to young musicians, and encouraged her to create CYO.

Today, CYO is the only youth orchestra in the United States dedicated to the study and performance of contemporary orchestral literature. Since its founding, the orchestra has been the recipient of the ASCAP Award for Adventurous Programming, the Northern Ohio Live Award of Achievement and the Sunshine Award from Young Audiences for excellence in arts education.

As of 2014, they have performed over 200 world premieres, all with the composers present. The annual Music & Its Industry concert provides the young musicians the opportunity to have professional music industry experiences. The very popular 'Rock the Orchestra' concert features a different performer or band every year – most recently Ben Folds.



Following a brief welcome by Ben Poe, a member of CYO's trumpet section, Grossman led the orchestra in the world premiere of Rands's *Music for Liza and Contemporary Youth Orchestra*. After playing that colorful, 90-second work, Grossman explained to the large audience that the work would become the "official" CYO theme and would be played at the beginning of each concert. The idea for commissioning the theme came from Interlochen, where each concert begins with a short excerpt from the second movement of Howard Hanson's *Symphony No. 2*, ("Romantic").

After Bernard Rands gave some heartfelt congratulatory remarks from the stage, the concert got fully underway with an excellent performance of the composer's *Danza Petrificada*. Trumpeter Luis Clebsch's muted opening solo was appropriately haunting and bass clarinet Seth Blankenship's extended solo was impressive.



Richard Hill's *Concerto for Jazz Trombone and Orchestra*, is a quirky piece, although in the hands of the very talented Rachel Waterbury, the three-movement concerto (Ragtime, Blues, Stomp), sounded like one of the greatest concertos ever written. Waterbury performed with a rich, full-bodied tone and displayed astonishing technical ability

throughout. At certain points I wondered — how does she do that? Grossman and the orchestra were sensitive collaborators, and the concerto featured some great solos by concertmaster Jacob Duber and clarinetist Sarah Porter.

Composer Stefan Podell possesses a tremendous talent for creating engaging musical narratives, as well as being a gifted orchestrator. These traits were in full evidence during his *Concerto for Two Violas and Orchestra*. The concerto was the second world premiere on Sunday's concerto, and was brilliantly performed by violists Lynne Ramsey and Jeffrey Irvine.



In writing the concerto, Podell used the fact that Ramsey and Irvine are husband and wife as a point of departure. In his composer's statement he writes, "...the concerto gave me an opportunity to explore different stages or moments I've experienced in my own relationship with my wonderful wife, Caity. Some of these have lasted years, and some have lasted but a few minutes." Although the concerto is in no way a piece of programmatic music, Podell's writing vividly depicts the ups and downs that are present in relationships throughout its three movements.

The opening *Allegro moderato* is heroic sounding and full of lyrical lines and lush melodies. A mini-cadenza played over sustained chords in the cellos and basses was a mesmerizing moment. The *Molto adagio* perfectly depicts relationship tensions and the *Presto ma non troppo*, brings the couple into their golden years. The tempo slows at the end and the final chords gloriously fade into the distance.



Ramsey and Irvine sounded spectacular. Both players tossed off the many technical lines traded between them with aplomb. Their tone matched perfectly, especially during the concerto's long third movement cadenza. The performance was a pleasure to hear and watch, as both performers seemed to relish the opportunity to be performing the new piece with Grossman and her young musicians.

A third work by Bernard Rands concluded the evening. The *London Serenade* was composed as a gift to honor the sixtieth birthday of Edwin London, a long-time faculty member at Cleveland State University and founder of the Cleveland Chamber Symphony, as well as a good friend of Rands.

The CYO gave a splendid performance of the relatively short work. Grossman acknowledged flutist Sonia Richman, clarinetists Katherine Serbinowski, Samuel Shomette and Sarah Porter, hornist Jocelyn Ting, oboist Sophie Gielink, bassoonist Claire Barrett, harpist Olivia Tse, cellist Jonny Goldenberg, and concertmaster Jacob Duber for their fine solo contributions.

Photos by Robert Muller.

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