

Review: Cleveland Orchestra's Fridays @ 7 (March 13)

by Jane Berkner



If the goal of the Cleveland Orchestra's Fridays @ 7 series is to create more diversity in their audiences, the concert in Severance Hall on Friday, March 13 can be considered a fantastic success. Curated by Jamey Haddad, the pre- and post concerts that sandwich the orchestra's performance included music from singer, songwriter and accordion player Magda Giannikou, students from Oberlin's performance and Improvisation Ensembles, and the eclectic jazz and funk band Snarky Puppy.

Members of Snarky Puppy joined Giannikou in Reinberger Hall for a pre-concert of song infused with jazz and world music. Early in the concert, a group of Oberlin students were invited on stage, performing her arrangements and improvising on cello, violin, bassoon and clarinet. Giannikou and Snarky Puppy bandleader and bassist Michael League had led a three-day improvisation workshop at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, culminating in the evening's performance.

Giannikou is a world music force. With her clear, velvety voice and quirky, warm and generous personality, she clearly loves life, music and working with students. Casually prompting and persuading band, students and audience alike, she began pieces by clapping or pounding out rhythms on her chest, coaxing us to join her in her rhythmic world. She cajoled the students into improvising beneath her impromptu story telling, and at one point got the audience to sing along. She marveled that it was the first time in audience participation history that everyone ended together on cue, saying, "perhaps that means we should encourage the youth to go hear orchestras."

The orchestra performed two works under the baton of Italian conductor Fabio Luisi during the hour-long concert in the main hall. The first, a composition by Luca Francesconi titled *Cobalt, Scarlet: Two Colors of Dawn* was composed in 1999-2000. This 25-minute work employed a large-scale orchestra, with extra winds, brass and percussion spilling onto the edges of the packed stage.

The program notes touted the work as “a testimony to Francesconi’s consummate craft as an orchestrator and weaver of Polyphonic webs.” His creative pairing of instruments to produce unusual colors was ample evidence of this throughout the piece. Hearing the work performed live also enhanced the appreciation for his use of space as an orchestration technique. The opening percussion notes gave a feeling of distance when sounded from different parts of the stage, and frequent scalar lines passing through sections of instruments added to this spatial sense. The piece is dark and brooding, and the orchestra brought a great deal of energy to the jazzy rhythm at its climax.



The second work on the program was the more familiar seventh symphony of Beethoven. Luisi took the orchestra from a somewhat nebulous first movement to a crystal clear, crisp performance of the later movements. Although bright and spirited, the insistently repeating rhythm of the first movement often lacked clarity as it passed throughout the orchestra. Luisi added an unusual *attacca* leading into the Allegretto second movement, which opened with a viola and cello *tutti* section sublime in its tranquility. Where the principal winds had played with some balance differences during the first movement, they were in complete agreement in the second movement, playing together with a singing, seamless blend. Clear, clean dynamic lines and incisive playing during the final movements brought the work to a rousing conclusion.

Following a standing ovation, the audience streamed out into the lobby for the post-concert, where Snarky Puppy was set to perform. With wet bars in every corner of the lobby, this part of the evening was aptly titled After-Party. Downstairs, a calmer, lighter fare of music was being served to the patrons in Severance Restaurant. Luca Mundaca, guitar and vocals and Dan Fernandez, percussion performed bossa nova, jazz and samba in the candlelit restaurant.

Playing a mixture of funk, rock, jazz, blues and gospel, the Grammy-winning band Snarky Puppy presented a high spirited, rambunctious performance. It was unfortunate that the band was not set up on a platform or stage. The floor of the lobby was packed with people, and the only ones who could view the band were standing on the steps or at the railing on the second floor. That didn't seem to stop anyone from enjoying what they were hearing, though. The stiffness of this shoulder-to-shoulder group of listeners quickly gave way to swaying and moving in rhythm to the funk and soulful sounds of the band.

The large number of younger audience members became increasingly evident as the post-concert came to its conclusion. The audience thinned out during the later portion of the band's set, leaving lines of eager, youthful faces illuminated by the blue and white lighting directly in front of the band. From the Oberlin students who participated in the evening's pre-concert to the audience members enjoying the post-concert, it seems that the Cleveland Orchestra is building a wonderfully bright new millennium, bringing youth and diversity to Severance Hall.

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