

Cleveland Orchestra with Lionel Bringuier & cellist Gautier Capuçon (April 16)

by Daniel Hathaway



French guest conductor Lionel Bringuier and French cellist Gautier Capuçon brought a program of French music both well-known and obscure to Severance Hall last weekend. The ever-adaptable Cleveland Orchestra took on a French accent for the occasion, producing a concert that was elegant and savory, and structured like a classic French menu. I heard the performance on Thursday evening, April 16.

Maurice Ravel's *Le tombeau de Couperin* introduced the feast. Light and delightful as a soufflé, the composer's reworkings of four piano pieces actually sounded like the ornate harpsichord music by the baroque *clavecinistes* that Ravel intended to suggest.

Principal oboe Frank Rosenwein dispatched his florid lines with fluid grace. Assistant principal flute Marisela Seger, principal English horn Robert Walters, principal clarinet Franklin Cohen and principal trumpet Michael Sachs took important solo turns in the course of the suite. The dotted rhythms of the *Forlane* have bogged down the forward progress of many performances, but Bringuier and the Orchestra pranced through that movement with a spring in their step.

Camille Saint-Saëns would have been happy to know that two cellists were in charge of his first concerto on Thursday evening. Bringuier and Capuçon studied in the same studio at the Paris Conservatoire, and they brought a long artistic relationship as well as a lot of celloistic savvy to this performance.

Gautier Capuçon embraced the concerto with passion, flair and freedom, and Bringuier and the Orchestra were at his heels at every turn in the drama. The single-movement piece flew by, hardly lingering over more lyrical moments like the antique minuet that

suddenly appears before the return of the opening melody that brings the work to a virtuosic conclusion.

Capuçon alternated between visceral power and alluring poetry. The audience was rapt during the whole course of the 20-minute concerto and rewarded the soloist with an enthusiastic ovation. After several callbacks, he responded with an amusing encore, the 90-second *March of the Small Soldiers* by Sergei Prokofiev (listen to his live performance of the piece at the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern Festival in 2009 [here](#)).



The *plat principal* in Thursday evening's concert was an exotic dish. Florent Schmitt, a 20th-century composer who has been curiously overlooked (though he had a strong influence on Igor Stravinsky), wrote an hour-long ballet score in 1907. *La Tragédie de Salomé* was inspired by the Paris premiere of Richard Strauss's opera earlier that year. The ballet was a success, logging some 50 performances. Its original orchestration was restricted by the size of the pit to only twenty players. Three years later, Schmitt turned the ballet into an orchestral suite, halving its length and expanding its scoring to symphonic dimensions.

That was the version Bringuier led on Thursday evening, a score Schmitt dedicated to Stravinsky. Though as complex as the music of Strauss, Schmitt's *Salomé* manages to speak in the composer's own voice. It's opulent and colorful, and rhythmically complex and thrilling at its conclusion (the "Dance of Terror"), as a storm gathers, cypress trees are uprooted and the Moab Mountains catch on fire, crushing Salomé to death. Bringuier and the orchestra gave the suite a stunning performance.

After that, Ravel's *Bolero* might seem like a routine dessert offering (“glace, crème caramel, mousse au chocolat”). It wasn't. Beginning with principal percussionist Marc Demoulakis's barely audible whispers on the snare drum, Bringuier sculpted a relentless 15-minute crescendo, assisted by winds and brass in various combinations so well-blended that you couldn't trust your memory or your ears to tell who was playing at many points.

Cannily, just moments from the end, Ravel jerks the piece into a higher key, then down again in a decisive cadence. Razzing brass licks bring it to a striking conclusion. Don't shortchange *Bolero* — it just requires an orchestra that can play it to such compelling effect as the Cleveland did under Lionel Bringuier on Thursday evening.

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