

**Cleveland Women's Orchestra:
80th Anniversary concert at Severance Hall
with violinist Michael Ferri (April 26)**

by Daniel Hathaway



Violinist Michael Ferri, who played the Bruch concerto with the Cleveland Women's Orchestra in 2012, returned to help celebrate the 80th anniversary of that ensemble with the Tchaikovsky concerto on Sunday, April 26 in Severance Hall. Under the direction of Robert Cronquist, Ferri, only one-quarter as old as the CWO, gave a fresh and invigorating reading of the concerto that peeled layers of accrued varnish off the work, making

it sound like the musical equivalent of a newly-cleaned painting.

That took place after intermission. To begin the program, Cronquist led the ensemble — all-female except the conductor and two members of the bass section — in a spirited reading of Carl Maria von Weber's *Oberon Overture*, graced by lovely horn and clarinet solos from Erica Bartik and Pam Elliot, respectively.

We're so accustomed to hearing only Maurice Ravel's orchestration of Modest Mussorgsky's piano suite, *Pictures at an Exhibition*, that we forget there are other versions. Thirty-eight for orchestra, in fact, including orchestrations (or compilations) by Vladimir Ashkenazy, Leopold Stokowski, and Leonard Slatkin; and reworkings for salon orchestra; for strings, piano and percussion; for orchestra and chorus; and even one that orchestrates each piece in the style of a different composer (including Britten, Wagner, Bartók, and Respighi).

Cronquist chose to play a version begun in 1886 by Mikail Tushmalov, a student of Rimsky-Korsakov, that omits every promenade after the first, and leaves out three of Mussorgsky's original movements — "Gnomus," "Tuileries," and "Bydlo" — though Cronquist added his own orchestration of the latter on Sunday.

The results are far darker and more Russian-sounding than Ravel's colorful orchestral hues. Though many will miss the saxophone solo in "The Old Castle" and the bells that peal forth in "The Great Gate of Kiev," Tushmalov's version has its own musical logic. The Cleveland Women's Orchestra gave it a rich and sonorous reading.

Self-possessed but unassuming, Michael Ferri approached the Tchaikovsky concerto less with a view to projecting his own personality onto the music than with the aim of bringing out what lies under its surface. He presented the composer's endlessly repeated themes objectively, without the kind of emotional overstatement that serves only to paint the lily and become tiresome.

Playing with fine bow control and excellent intonation even in the upper stratosphere, Ferri sailed easily through fast passages and virtuosic flourishes. Only at the frenetic end of the first movement did the solo line become a bit blurred.

Cronquist and the orchestra matched Ferri's style and energy throughout the piece, winning a strong and lengthy ovation from the good-sized audience. After a bit of conductorial arm-twisting, Michael Ferri agreed to an encore. He played an unaccompanied piece by Prokofiev with style and vivacity.

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