

Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra at Severance Hall (May 3)

by Timothy Robson



There were many happy faces worn by parents and friends of the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra (COYO) members on Sunday evening, May 3, after their concert at Severance Hall. And with good reason – it was superb, and several times during the course of the evening, at least one listener had to remind himself that this was a student ensemble, not a professional orchestra.

COYO's music director (and Cleveland Orchestra assistant conductor) Brett Mitchell conducted a program that began with Samuel Barber's *Medea's Dance of Vengeance*, op. 23a, and ended with Béla

Bartók's dazzling *Concerto for Orchestra*. In between, the fine young cellist Henry Shapard was the soloist in Dmitri Kabalevsky's *Cello Concerto No. 1 in G minor*, Op. 49.

In recent decades, Samuel Barber's brand of mildly astringent romanticism has fallen out of favor, with only a handful of his works – the Violin Concerto, the ubiquitous *Adagio for Strings*, perhaps the solo vocal cantata *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* – heard regularly. Between 1945 and 1947 Barber composed for Martha Graham's company a score for the ballet eventually known as *Cave of the Heart*. The scenario is the Greek myth of Medea and her overpowering jealousy of her lover Jason and his new bride. Medea kills Jason's bride, as well as her own children.

Graham's ballet scenario is freighted with considerable modern psychological symbolism, which thankfully is irrelevant to the two-part concert work, *Medea's Dance of Vengeance*, that Barber extracted from the ballet score in 1947. A slow Meditation opens with mysterious, widely spaced chords in a prominent solo piano, soft strings and jittery

xylophone. It is tonal and lushly scored, with the material developed into several shrieking climaxes before settling back into the opening music.

Medea's dance itself is based on off-kilter, repeated rhythmic patterns. The music becomes, like Medea's mental state, ever more unhinged, building to a climax of deafening volume, ending with a shattering chord made even more emphatic by a pounding bass drum that brings the piece to its unsettling conclusion. COYO and Mitchell gave the work a compelling performance, emphasizing the lyricism of the opening Meditation, and the oddness of those piano and xylophone passages. The dance of vengeance itself was ferocious.

Here and elsewhere in this concert, Brett Mitchell controlled his forces so that there was a minimum of the “overplaying” that sometimes occurs in Severance Hall with orchestras not experienced with the hall's subtle and responsive acoustics.

Henry Shapard is a junior at University School, and as the winner of the 2014-15 Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra Concerto Competition, was the soloist for this final concert of the season. His teacher is Cleveland Orchestra cellist Richard Weiss. Dmitri Kabalevsky's *Cello Concerto No. 1 in G minor* was a good choice for this performance. It is not as familiar as, say, the Elgar or Dvořák concertos, so there is less of a tendency to compare a youthful performance with the many live and iconic recorded performances that exist. Yet the Kabalevsky is an attractive work, with technical challenges, ear-catching lyricism and well-crafted musicality.

The first movement is a snappy march, opening with string *pizzicati*, above which the solo cello plays a florid melody that becomes the principal theme of the movement. The second movement is filled with long, flowing melody. The third movement is a set of variations on a Russian folksong, ending in a swirl of perpetual motion.

Henry Shapard is a talented cellist, exhibiting excellent technical skills, musicianship and preparation. It is safe to say that this performance is not his final statement on this concerto. As he grows in his musicianship and experience, his interpretation will continue to evolve. But without doubt he has talent worthy of following in the future. Brett Mitchell and COYO provided solid support to the soloist.

After intermission and before the Bartók work, conductor Mitchell recognized his student musicians, their Cleveland Orchestra coaches, the students' teachers and, especially the students' parents (including his own parents, who were present for the concert and whom he referred to as the “ultimate COYO parents”). Finally he saluted the graduating seniors in the orchestra, for whom this was their last concert. There was rousing applause for all who contribute to the success of COYO.

How lucky the members of COYO are to have the opportunity to perform Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra*, one of the landmark – and trickiest – masterpieces in the orchestral repertoire! It is awash in brilliant solo passages for individual players, combined with virtuoso writing for the ensemble. It was a daring choice, even for a young orchestra with as much potential as COYO, and for the most part it was not necessary to qualify the reading as a student performance.

Ensemble was generally precise, tempos were well-chosen, and phrasing was flexible. The high voltage closing movement showed remarkable precision. The many soloists were excellent, especially Peter Feher, principal flute (from Revere High School), whose playing was outstanding. There were some imperfections along the way; some “blooper” brass notes, and an occasional balance problem (some harp passages that were more prominent than necessary). But overall, this was an accomplished performance that will surely be long remembered by these players.

The Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra will undertake a tour to China from June 15-24, with repertoire that includes the Barber work on this program. There is almost no doubt that they will impress their Chinese audiences as much as they impressed those in Severance Hall this weekend.

Photo credit: Roger Mastroianni.

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