

Cleveland Orchestra: Hindemith, Widmann & Dvořák with Christian Tetzlaff & Franz Welser-Möst (May 14)

by Daniel Hathaway



Franz Welser-Möst returned to the Severance Hall podium on Thursday, May 14 to lead The Cleveland Orchestra in a dynamic concert of music by Paul Hindemith, Jörg Widmann and Antonín Dvořák. Though the marketing department successfully advertised Dvořák's "*New World*" *Symphony* as the main attraction (resulting in a large turnout for a Thursday evening), Christian Tetzlaff's riveting performance of Widmann's *Violin Concerto* was the most musically intriguing entry on the program, with The Orchestra's reading of Hindemith's *Concert Music for Strings and Brass* not far behind.

Widmann wrote his concerto in 2007 for Tetzlaff and the German Youth Philharmonic, who must have had a fun challenge preparing for its premiere. But most of the burden of the piece falls to Tetzlaff, who plays so continuously (and so athletically) during its 25-minute duration that he used an assistant to turn his pages on Thursday.

Beginning with a dramatic solo gesture, Tetzlaff launched into a lengthy and animated colloquy with the orchestra that explored a vast range of emotional affects from the wistful to the deranged. Dancing from foot to foot and eventually traversing the entire range of the instrument, the violinist continually proposed new topics, some of which were pursued by the orchestra. (One was taken up early on by the flute, surrounded by a nimbus of tones from the celesta, while others merely gave way to the next idea.) The generally quiet but complex and colorful orchestral background reflected both Widmann's expertise as an orchestrator and the influences of Alban Berg.

Only once did the music come to a dead stop — a false ending that led to a crescendo into orchestral pandemonium, a big horn solo by Michael Mayhew answered by striking horn murmurs, and an ending where Tetzlaff's high violin harmonics heterodyned with bowed strokes on crotales (small, tuned brass discs) in the percussion section.



Tetzlaff certainly owns this fascinating work. But what is the violinist trying to express in his urgent and soulful playing during those 25 minutes? In an interview with *The New York Times*, Tetzlaff held his cards close to his chest. “The violin concerto is half an hour of slow music, dense and romantic, devastatingly beautiful at times,” is all he would reveal, and so it is. Tetzlaff plays it with authority and with due respect to its seemingly impenetrable mysteries.

Thursday's program began with Hindemith's *Konzertmusik*, a piece that daringly pits the strings against the full brass section, and yet another work we have Serge Koussevitsky and the Boston Symphony to thank for its commissioning.

Energized by dotted rhythms, with its harmonies growing out of its contrapuntal lines, the first part of *Konzertmusik* embraces Hindemith's acerbic grandeur. In a big interlude where the brass play alone, The Cleveland Orchestra's trumpets, horns, trombones and tuba sounded glorious. Eventually, the strings joined the texture again, playing a broad, striking unison line joined by horns.

In Part Two, a recurring three-chord gesture from the brass punctuated a skittery fugue in the strings later interrupted by bluesy brass licks. Lovely trombone, trumpet and horn solos by Massimo de la Rosa, Michael Sachs and Michael Mayhew adorned the

midsection before the brass returned to its initial dotted rhythms in a coda. The piece ended on a unison note played by the whole ensemble.

Though Hindemith calls for “as many strings as possible,” and combines the normally separate first and second violins into a single section, the opening work fielded the smallest string complement of the evening. More violins would have been welcome.

Wistful cellos and winds began Dvořák’s *Symphony No. 9 in e minor*, then Welser-Möst inspired a Bohemian-style Big Bang that sent the rest of the movement spinning off into edgy brilliance. English hornist Robert Walters played his mournful solos affectingly in the slow movement, beautifully haloed by dark string tone and answered poignantly by clarinetist Franklin Cohen. Explosive timpani set the “Scherzo” on its giddy course, a movement that segued into a manic finale that subsided only briefly to let its second theme sing out (a tune you could hear audience members humming). Franklin Cohen contributed distinguished solos to the last movement and the ending was positively golden.

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