

Cleveland Orchestra with Jahja Ling: Franklin Cohen farewell concerto (July 26)

by Daniel Hathaway



When it's time for a musician to say goodbye to an ensemble and its audience after 39 years, what piece should he choose for his swan song? Long-time Cleveland Orchestra principal clarinet Franklin Cohen revisited Carl Maria von Weber's second concerto on Sunday night, July 26 at Blossom, winning a standing ovation before he even played a note.

Cohen, a beloved presence in TCO for the last four decades, has also been one of its most frequent members to appear as a soloist with the ensemble. He introduced Weber's concerto to The Cleveland Orchestra at Blossom in 1981 under the baton of Jesús López-Cobos, and repeated it there in the summers of 1998 and 2011 as well as at Severance Hall in the fall of 2011. Jahja Ling was the conductor in 1998, and he was on the podium again on Sunday evening to join Cohen in a revelatory performance of the piece.

Cohen's bio in the program book noted that the clarinetist has been acclaimed for the "strength, passion, and beauty of his playing." All of those qualities were present in his performance of the Weber, a piece that serves up Mozartean balance and grace along with plenty of operatic fervor.

Announcing from his first entrance the wide range of pitches from top to bottom that he and Weber would spend the next twenty minutes exploring, Franklin Cohen dug deep into the fabric of the E-flat concerto, finding treasures there that frequently go unmined. His power and virtuosity came into full play, as well as his affecting treatment of lyrical passages and his skillful shaping of lines — especially the recitative that leads into the "Polacca." The concerto ended with a particularly stylish version of that dance-inspired finale, full of dizzying swirls of notes, but laid-back and wryly amusing. Through their

committed approach, Cohen and Ling honored Weber by treating his second concerto as a first-class piece of music, not just as a flashy showpiece.



A second, noisier standing ovation followed, then more call-backs, flowers, and finally, Ling urged Franklin Cohen onto the podium for a final bow. (Cohen mimicked conducting, maybe a presage of new activities to come?) Judging merely from the number of musicians who turned out for his final appearance, Franklin Cohen is a Cleveland treasure. It's not enough to say that he'll be sorely missed in the ranks of The Cleveland Orchestra.

Jahja Ling is another Cleveland Orchestra VIP, and the applause that welcomed him to the stage on Sunday evening was impressive in its own right. Having conducted the ensemble on a regular basis for more than thirty years, Ling and the Orchestra are not only on the same page, but often on the same sixteenth note, so closely do they read each other's minds about details and nuances.



Ling opened the concert with Johann Strauss Jr.'s waltz-filled *Fledermaus* overture, a perfect vehicle for pointing up the close connections between conductor and orchestra. Little lifts, subtle tucks in tempo, splendid transitions, and brilliant outbursts of orchestral virtuosity made this performance of a well-known overture something extraordinary. The Orchestra's massed string tone was both strong and velvety and the brass brought an old world distinction to the sonic mix.



The second half of the concert was devoted to Edward Elgar's *Variations on an original theme*, an occasion duly marked by some audience members, who sported Edwardian stick-on moustaches. Cleverly shaping each variation so the individual cameos of Elgar's friends came across clearly, but masterfully pacing the work so it retained its arc, Ling brought new life to a piece that can use some fresh air. Time seemed to pause in its tracks as he led a deeply-felt performance of "Nimrod," but after that, "Dorabella" giggled along with all the vivacity of an energetic young woman. Moments like the final variation — presumably E.E.'s own portrait — that can be as stodgy as Edwardian England itself, sounded noble and spacious. In terms of ensemble, The Cleveland Orchestra was simply dazzling from stem to stern — no "enigma" there.

The weather gods sent muggy weather Blossomward for this occasion, but somehow the repertoire and its performance took on a delightful summery quality. That no doubt sent the audience home on Sunday feeling particularly grateful for Jahja Ling, Franklin Cohen, The Cleveland Orchestra, and the Blossom Music Center.

Photos by Roger Mastroianni.

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