

Cleveland Orchestra with Rudolf Buchbinder (May 19)

by Daniel Hathaway



Strange to tell, but in its nearly hundred-year history, The Cleveland Orchestra never got around to playing two major works by Antonín Dvořák and Leoš Janáček until last Thursday evening. On May 19, Franz Welser-Möst led the orchestra in their first-ever performance of Dvořák's *The Wood Dove* and their first performance of more than the overture from Janáček's opera *The House of the Dead*.

The Wood Dove is one of four tone poems Dvořák wrote in 1896-1897 on bizarre stories by the Czech poet Karel Jaromir Erben. This one has to do with a widow who poisons her husband, marries a young man, then, driven mad by a wood dove singing over her husband's grave, drowns herself in a river.

The story gives Dvořák the opportunity to incorporate funeral marches both for the husband and the wife, and tuck a festive wedding in between. Portentous horns and timpani set the scene for the first cortege. Offstage trumpets announce the wedding. Peasant dances — Dvořák's stock in trade — are interrupted by trilling flutes (the nattering wood dove) and the dark murmur of the bass clarinet.

Dvořák lavished his orchestrational skills on the 20-minute piece, colorfully painting the scenario of Erben's cheerful little tale, and Welser-Möst and the Orchestra brought it vividly to life.

In addition to sharing a Czech heritage, Dvořák and Janáček were connected by circumstance on Thursday's program: Janáček conducted the premiere of *The Wood Dove* in 1898 in Brno. Nearly 30 years later, he began composing an opera based on Dostoyevsky's *Memoirs from the House of the Dead*, the chronicle of the author's four-year sojourn in a prison camp in Siberia.

Left uncompleted at the composer's death, the opera was finished by different hands, and several suites have been excerpted from the results. On Thursday, The Cleveland Orchestra played the 1979 suite compiled by František Jílek, conductor of the Janáček Theater in Brno from 1952-1977.

Talk about cheerful subjects! The opera is all about incarceration and forced labor in the most iconic of all places of exile, but Janáček's ingenious music and unorthodox orchestration — with a battery of exotic percussion instruments including whips and chains — pricks up the ears for nearly half an hour.

That orchestration is arresting right from the beginning, where solo first and second violins sing out against the brass. Strings and brass engage in salvos of sound separated by wild flourishes in the winds. A strident piccolo solo comes out of nowhere, and sections of the orchestra mock and razz each other. Principal percussion Marc Damoulakis seemed to be having the most fun, wielding two sizes of wind-up ratchets as well as slapsticks and choke cymbals, but his colleagues joined in with jarring bass drum beats and climactic snare drum rolls. It made you want to seek out the full opera.

After intermission, classicism reigned with a magisterial performance of Beethoven's fifth piano concerto by Rudolf Buchbinder. After his opening flourishes, the soloist has a lot of music to sit through, but Welser-Möst and the Orchestra set Buchbinder up with a magnificent springboard for his first thematic entrance..

The soloist played with firm hands, robust sonority, and spectacular octave work, creating an easy symbiosis with the Orchestra. Buchbinder crafted a well-supported tone for the soft passages of the elegant second movement and subtly inflected the key changes in the finale.

The moment everybody waits for — the transition from the second to the third movement — was the only tiny flaw in Buchbinder's interpretation. Of course we know what's coming, but it's nice even for the pianist to pretend to be surprised when those little cells of notes congeal into a theme that takes the concerto to its thrilling conclusion.

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