

Cleveland Orchestra with Bramwell Tovey & pianist Javier Perianes at Blossom (July 17)

by Neil McCalmont



On Sunday evening, July 17, The Cleveland Orchestra celebrated the centenary of the National Parks Service with an Americana-themed concert titled “An American in Paris” at Blossom Music Center — their own venue located in Cuyahoga Valley National Park. The night’s program consisted of works by Ravel, Copland, and Gershwin conducted by Bramwell Tovey, with guest pianist Javier Perianes.

The warm summer night added to the picturesque atmosphere of Blossom, as picnickers aplenty gathered on the lawn around the pavilion and giggling children rolled down the hill, evading the staff’s desperate attempt to quiet them.

It was also the orchestra’s last Blossom concert with Robert Vernon, their legendary principal violist of 40 years, who is retiring from his orchestral career. He received a standing ovation, as well as a moving tribute from Tovey, who pointed out that many in the viola section were pupils of Vernon.

Maurice Ravel’s *Rhapsodie Espagnole* started the concert, with its hypnotic opening played mystically by the orchestra. The following “*Malagueña*” (flamenco dance) was filled with lively pizzicatos, and the next movement featured thrilling flute solos played brilliantly by Marisela Sager. The fun-filled finale ended in a carnival of orchestral colors and dance rhythms.

As the “Suite” from Aaron Copland’s *Appalachian Spring* began, some particularly melodious birds decided to join in the serene music making, which added to the pastoral feel of the piece — and continued throughout the evening. Lyle Steelman’s trumpet solo in the “Wedding Dance” sounded like a merry hoe-down, and the subsequent dialogue between concertmaster William Preucil and oboist Jeffrey Rathbun was quite moving.

The infamous Blossom “Boom” made a quiet cameo at the beginning of the “Shaker Hymn.” This section especially showcased how well the orchestra plays and breathes as one entity, resembling a large chamber group. You couldn’t help but be reminded of majestic American landscapes when listening to their breathtaking interpretation of this important and difficult work.

Spanish pianist Javier Perianes made his Cleveland Orchestra debut with Ravel’s *Piano Concerto in G*, a masterpiece inspired by the French composer’s trip to the United States and his affinity for the country’s Jazz music. The work starts with a bang, sending the orchestra and soloist off like racehorses in a whirl of sound, but the stunning precision of Cleveland’s musicians transformed the difficulties into a riveting ride. E-flat Clarinetist Daniel McKelway’s wild, high register solo jabbed at you like a boxer. Perianes portrayed the tender second movement with the innocence of a young girl, which was later complemented by a gorgeous English horn line. The pianist performed with Mozart-like clarity, pristinely matching up with the other instruments during runs, particularly the clarinet during the final bars of the concerto.

The final work of the concert was George Gershwin’s tone poem *An American in Paris*. Tovey gave a hilarious introduction to the piece, pointing out that playing the taxi horns required six years of study at Juilliard, and that the addition of saxophones to the orchestra gave the piece a certain *je ne sais quoi*. On a more serious note, he also mentioned the importance of the longstanding relationship between France and the States, calling attention to the recent catastrophes in Paris and Nice. He noted that music is one way we as a community can come together to show support for those that need it.

The uplifting work was performed unsurpassably by the orchestra. Though usually considered a “lighter” piece of music, the musicians added many nuances, highlighted emotional contrasts, and brilliantly captured its spirit — whether it demanded the lushness of a Tchaikovsky or the smile of a Scott Joplin. Superbly paced by Tovey, the performance achieved a marvellous balance of give and take, resulting in a thrilling end to a splendid concert.

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