

## Cleveland Orchestra: Friday@7 with Bartók and Brahms (Oct. 21)

by Nicholas Jones

The superb young pianist Yuja Wang is a fiery presence. Recently named *Musical America's* Instrumentalist of the Year for 2017, the flamboyant, Chinese-born Wang has justly soared to fame for her gutsy performances of the most technically demanding solo and concerto literature for the piano. She plays with a formidable command of the finger-busting pieces of the Romantic and high modern, and she brings to them a sense of burning intensity.

Yuja Wang was the featured soloist at concerts by The Cleveland Orchestra last weekend, October 20-22. For its occasional Fridays@7 Series, the Orchestra gives a shorter-than-usual concert, in this case dispensing with an opening piece (on Thursday and Saturday, this was Bohuslav Martinů's *Parables*). As a result, the audience on Friday was plunged immediately into the startling dissonances of Bartók's modernist *Piano Concerto No. 1*, Op. 83.

Guest conductor Jakub Hruša set a crisp tempo, negotiating the composer's constantly shifting meters with ease and clarity. The Orchestra was at the top of its game, delivering Bartók's many moments of syncopated fortissimo both with exactness and a feeling of spontaneity and surprise, as the composer clearly demands. Timpanist Paul Yancich and his colleagues in the percussion section — positioned at the front of the stage as Bartók directed — performed their virtuosic parts with fearless mastery.

But the show really belonged to Wang. Unlike his Romantic predecessors, Bartók gave the piano no great melodies, but they were hardly missed. Instead, what we got from both Bartók and Wang was a thrilling lesson in the piano as a percussion instrument: driving chords packed with dissonances, a dazzling range of tone colors, and swoops across the entire playing field of the keyboard. Rhythmic excitement in the first movement gave way to more contemplative chamber music in the second. The final

movement exploded into what seemed at times a maelstrom of fragmentary motifs, but there was never any doubt that Wang and her collaborators were in complete control of the storm.

It is not easy to find the right composition to follow a high-temperature work like the Bartók Concerto. On these concerts, the big second-half piece was Johannes Brahms's *Symphony No. 4 in e*, Op. 98. It didn't work particularly well in that slot.

After a half hour of Bartók's percussive intensity, the drooping ambiguities of Brahms's opening theme sounded more tired than searching. Perhaps as a result, Hrůša seemed determined to inject yet more energy into the performance: his dynamics were resolutely and almost unwaveringly at or above the level of forte, and he repeatedly exhorted soloists and sections to wring maximum emotion from phrase after phrase.

Melodies were gorgeous, as they should be in Brahms, and there was plenty of grandeur in the whole piece. But the sheer scale of sound and constant intensity of phrasing left little room for relaxation or contemplation. And the high dynamic level in much of the performance made it difficult to hear the inner voices in Brahms's marvellous contrapuntal writing.

The horn section played beautifully throughout the symphony, and with particularly moving effect when joined by the trombones in the fourth movement. Kudos to principal flute Joshua Smith for his evocative and melancholy solo in that complex final movement.

The dress code for the evening was curiously inconsistent: the Orchestra in black open-neck shirts, the conductor in white tie and tails, and the soloist (well-known for her striking outfits) in an off-the-shoulder silver lamé dress.

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