

Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra with pianist Catharine Baek (May 12)

by Timothy Robson



The Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra played an ambitious program of works by Joan Tower, Maurice Ravel, and Sergei Prokofiev at Severance Hall on Friday evening, May 12, the last concert of their 2016-17 season. It was a bittersweet occasion. Not only did the Orchestra bid farewell to a group of graduating seniors, but it was conductor Brett Mitchell's 29th and final concert with COYO, marking the end of his four-year term as Associate Conductor of The Cleveland Orchestra before taking up duties as Music Director of the Colorado Symphony.

Given the unsettled political climate in the United States, American composer Joan Tower's *Made in America* seemed a particularly apt bit of programming. A 15-minute tone poem that draws on ongoing struggles in American history, its music is urgent and often quite dissonant. But phrases of *America the Beautiful* emerge from the musical texture, reminding the listener of the country's strengths. COYO was up to the work's challenges. Especially fine was a complex duet for two solo trumpets, followed in similar passages by clarinets and flutes. The density and volume built in a dramatic crescendo to a final accented chord.

Ravel's *Piano Concerto in G* is a minefield, full of exposed entrances, tricky ensemble, and important solos in the orchestra, with plenty of opportunities for things to go awry. On top of all that, the music needs to sound elegant and effortless. The stakes are high. Catharine Baek, a 17-year-old junior at Willoughby South High School and winner of the 2016-17 COYO Concerto Competition, was a fluent soloist. She had the fistfuls of notes well in hand, and she caught the spirit of Ravel's difficult solo part. Her sound, a bit light for an auditorium as large as Severance Hall, was at times engulfed by the orchestra's sound.

Baek's playing in the slow waltz of the second movement was particularly expressive, enhanced by notable work from the English horn soloist. Despite some vagaries of intonation and blend, it was an enjoyable reading. Brett Mitchell and COYO were supportive accompanists throughout.

Mitchell stretched the young performers to their limits in Prokofiev's wartime masterpiece, *Symphony No. 5*. The opening movement features both soaring lyricism and Prokofiev's own brand of high drama, reaching a volcanic fortissimo at the final chord. The second movement Allegro (essentially a scherzo) is full of chattering winds, with only a brief moment of repose at its center. Although the sense of the Adagio is funereal, Mitchell emphasized its mercurial mood changes, from calm to bombast. The fourth movement finished with a madcap race to the Symphony's end.

Severance Hall was full of proud family members and friends of the performers, and they certainly had good reason to be. And although their Cleveland Orchestra mentors would say that there is always more to learn and improve on, the commitment of everyone involved was readily apparent in this fine performance.

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