

## Cleveland Orchestra: Summers@Severance July 14

by Timothy Robson



Severance Hall was packed on Friday, July 14, for the first of this year's Summers@Severance concerts. It was the perfect evening for this more casual concert, which included audience members attired in everything from t-shirts and shorts to evening attire, plus food and drinks before and after on the terrace.

In the auditorium, however, the proceedings were anything but casual. Franz Welser-Möst conducted a program of Beethoven: the Symphonies Nos. 1 and 5, and the Overture to *Egmont*. It was a preview of a major Beethoven cycle that Welser-Möst will conduct in spring 2018 as part of The Cleveland Orchestra's 100th anniversary celebration. If this concert — and last week's Blossom Festival opener, which included the 2nd Symphony — is any indication, that series deserves to be a very hot ticket. In Friday's performance, conductor and orchestra were ablaze in unified passion for this core symphonic repertoire.

In 1809 Beethoven was commissioned to write an overture and incidental music for a revival of Wolfgang von Goethe's 1788 play *Egmont*. After the slow introduction with its accented chords, the Orchestra launched into the body of the Overture. Welser-Möst kept the pulse moving, modeling the political urgency of the play. Along the way were contrasting moments of repose, but Beethoven the dramatist was fully in evidence, especially in the sudden grand pause before the final huge crescendo to the end, complete with trumpet fanfares.

Beethoven's debt to Haydn as a symphonist has long been noted, but even in his First Symphony, his independence in harmony and musical development stands apart. At a striking series of cadences, Beethoven upends the expected by passing through several keys — F major, A minor, and G major — before finally settling in the "real" key of C. Although the thematic materials are not developed to the extent of his later symphonies,

Beethoven clearly advanced Haydn's techniques. The performance was exquisite and full of detailed phrasing.

The second movement continued the sense of urgency, although at a more moderate tempo. Welser-Möst kept the pulse from becoming too languid. Articulations were scrupulously matched across sections. This consistency of phrasing, but with musicality, not mannerism, is what sets TCO apart from lesser ensembles. The quick, triple meter of the Menuetto was more like a scherzo.

The halting, upward scale that introduces the finale set the thematic material for the rest of the movement. Trumpets, horns, and drums give this movement a military air. False steps and further development are diversions along the way to the Symphony's bold conclusion.

The applause greeting the conductor after intermission had not yet died down before he launched into what are probably the most famous four notes in music, the opening of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5*. Welser-Möst was clearly eager for Beethoven's drama to unfold. The contrasts between the First and Fifth Symphonies are notable, especially in the larger orchestra deployed for the Fifth and extended musical development. This was not a performance with a "concept," but built from the music itself: urgent, but with enough flexibility of tempo to sound relaxed at appropriate times.

A remarkable characteristic of this performance was the clarity and transparency of the orchestral texture. Inner contrapuntal voices that might have been lost were precisely delineated throughout, as were the carefully balanced wind chords that set off the string melody in the second movement. There were stark contrasts in dynamics, from the softest pianissimos to brilliant fortissimos, yet nothing seemed forced to extremes. The transition between the third and fourth movements, when the C-minor tonality gives way to C major, was magical in its sensitivity.

The ovation at the end was vocal and extended, with calls for an encore, a request sadly not granted. This concert was clearly a winner for The Cleveland Orchestra.

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