

Cleveland Orchestra at Blossom with Fabien Gabel & Juho Pohjonen (Aug. 19)

by Daniel Hathaway



The promotional material for The Cleveland Orchestra's program on Saturday, August 19 may have shouted "Bolero!," but a brilliant performance by Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen of Sergei Prokofiev's brash first concerto — presided over by French guest conductor Fabien Gabel — was

the true headliner on this perfect summer evening at the Blossom Music Center.

Pohjonen was impressive from the outset, embellishing Prokofiev's mysterious D-flat chord progressions with sonorous octaves, easily sending his percussive tones out into the pavilion through the thick orchestration, and superbly realizing the composer's breathless sequence of musical events — including abrupt changes of mood and tonality.

The pianist's dark-toned playing continued into the second movement with its elaborate cadenza (the concerto is really one big movement with subsections). Ensemble in the third movement can go off the rails at several junctures, but rather than playing it safe, Gabel and Pohjonen cast caution aside and held things right at the edge of possibility. The audience gave the thrilling performance the ovation it deserved.

The evening began with a transatlantic alliance between the nearly-forgotten French composer Florent Schmitt and Baltimore's master of the macabre, Edgar Allen Poe. Schmitt's *The Haunted Palace* is a "symphonic etude" on a six-stanza poem dating from 1839 that was later included in Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*.

Ranging from the ominous to the opulent, Schmitt's orchestrations revealed a composer with a fine ear and an inventive mind but who was not always completely in control of his narrative. Brassy climaxes separated by scherzo-like sections led to more of the same, and after a while, the piece seemed to have lost its way, no matter how lovely the

solo and ensemble playing.

Though he was perhaps not so intimately in touch with the Iberian spirit as Ravel (whose mother was Basque), Debussy successfully evokes Andalusian scenes in *Ibéria*. The second part of his *Images*, the attractive work received a laid-back performance, transparent in texture and replete with interesting inner voices and nuanced tempo changes. The Blossom crickets added a bit of *musique concrète* to the second movement night scene, and the Orchestra's string section momentarily became the world's largest guitar in the third movement.

The evening ended with Ravel's *Bolero*, a piece that transcends its warhorse status, especially if a performance is as skillfully conceived and lovingly performed as the one the Blossom audience enjoyed on Saturday evening. Fabian Gabel set a deliciously slow tempo that snare drummer Marc Damoulakis kept as steady as an atomic clock, giving soloists and sections plenty of room to play expressively with Ravel's sinuous melody. All of those contributors shone brightly, but the tenor and soprano saxophone soloist was first among equals for sheer sensual elegance.

Ravel knew exactly when to interrupt the hypnotic progress of the piece with a plunge from C Major into E Major, then suddenly back again before ending the piece in a blaze of glissandos from the brass. A listener in the next row down was patiently waiting for that surprising moment, and suddenly began conducting it himself. Nice audience participation!

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