

Earth and Air String Orchestra: “A Purely Lyrical Process” (October 6)

by Mike Telin



The musical splendor of the Russian Empire filled the nave of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Cleveland Heights last Friday when conductor David Ellis led his young Earth and Air String Orchestra in a program titled “A Purely

Lyrical Process,” featuring music of and inspired by Tchaikovsky. Ellis approached each of the evening’s three works with a relaxed style, drawing expressive phrases that ebbed and flowed from his players.

The conductor shaped the contemplative main theme of the *Elegy for String Orchestra* wonderfully, allowing the inner voices to be heard clearly. The brief, agitated middle section was spirited, and the final return of the melody was woeful and introspective.

Arguably the most popular of Tchaikovsky’s music for strings is his *Serenade in C*. Filled with stately melodies, attractive waltzes, and impish fast passages, the joyful work is always a pleasure to hear and this performance did not disappoint.

Ellis was clearly having fun with the piece, and the players responded in kind. The opening was full-bodied and transitioned seamlessly into a lilting Andante. The Valse was truly lovely and Ellis was in full command of each of the subtle changes in tempo. The dark yet tender *Élégie*, with its arpeggiated pizzicato figures in the low strings, was appropriately somber. The quiet beginning of the Finale led to a brisk account of the Allegro before returning to the work’s majestic opening theme. The piece is not without many tricky technical passages, which at times left the players scrambling, resulting in less than perfect intonation and ensemble. Still, those few occasions did not deter from an enjoyable performance.

In between those two works was Anton Arensky's *Variations on a Theme by Tchaikovsky*. The expressive performance was highlighted by a soulful Andantino (Variation III), galloping pizzicatos (Variation IV), and a meditative Andante (Variation VII). The concluding tutti pizzicato lingered in the church's pleasing acoustics before dying away.

Photo: Alex Belisle

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