

## Cleveland Orchestra with Preucil as leader and soloist (November 9)

by Daniel Hathaway



Before dedicated conductors began standing in front of orchestras and wielding batons, ensembles used several means to coordinate their playing. The least subtle and most dangerous — as Jean-Baptiste Lully found out — was to pound on the floor with a staff. (He managed to wound himself in the foot and eventually died of gangrene.) More safely, ensembles were cued from the

keyboard or by the first violinist, as Cleveland Orchestra audiences have experienced in past performances led by Mitsuko Uchida and William Preucil, who guided the proceedings while playing the piano and violin.

Concertmaster William Preucil took things a step further on Thursday evening, November 9, when he led an entire concert of music by Vivaldi, Haydn, and Mendelssohn, doing double duty as soloist. That change in routine was heralded at the beginning of the concert. Instead of being seated when the lights came down, waiting for the concertmaster to appear and call for a tuning note, the ensemble of twelve violins, four violas, four cellos, two double basses, and harpsichord all filed on at once with Preucil. Having tuned backstage, they immediately launched into Antonio Vivaldi's *Violin Concerto in e*, Op. 11, No. 2, nicknamed "Il Favorito" — possibly because it was a favorite of Charles V, to whom Vivaldi presented the piece in a collection of a dozen concertos.

For the concerto, Preucil stood in the center of the ensemble where he was clearly visible to his colleagues and needed to do a minimum of cueing. The performance was tight and tidy — although a bit safe compared to the way period instrument

ensembles now play the music of the prolific Venetian composer. Preucil's solo work was elegant.

For Haydn's *Symphony No. 88 in G*, the orchestra grew a pair of stands in each string section to balance the oboes, bassoons, horns, trumpets, and timpani the composer calls for. Here Preucil led from his normal chair, turned a bit inward.

It's often said that The Cleveland Orchestra plays like a large chamber ensemble no matter how many musicians are onstage, and the Haydn performance only corroborated that commonplace. Subtleties abounded, and details fell nicely into place. The surprises in the second movement — the oboe and cello duet, the unusual appearance of trumpets and drums, the hyper-ornamented violin lines — made a fine effect. Haydn's imitation of bagpipes in the third-movement trio was as much fun as his references to folk music always turn out to be, and aside from a few passages in the Finale that weren't perfectly in sync from back to front of the orchestra, the performance was a delight both in concept and execution.

More stands and musicians appeared for Mendelssohn's *Symphony No. 3*, "Scottish," the largest challenge of the evening for a conductorless ensemble. Though there might have been some white-knuckle moments for the players, the work came off as a well-coordinated, well-balanced account of one of the composer's most picturesque pieces. That said, the Mendelssohn probably pushed toward the limits of works that can be played without a moderator on the podium — a Mahler symphony without a pilot could be a disaster.

*Photo by Roger Mastroianni: Preucil leading Mozart's Symphony No. 34 in April 2015.*

*Published on ClevelandClassical.com November 14, 2017.*

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