

## Cleveland Orchestra with organist Paul Jacobs (Nov. 24)

by Daniel Hathaway



The menu for The Cleveland Orchestra's Thanksgiving Weekend concerts may have resembled a potluck more than a well-balanced menu, but the main course, Stephen Paulus's continuously imaginative *Grand Concerto for Organ and Orchestra* with Paul Jacobs at the Severance Hall E.M.

Skinner, left you wanting a second helping of the late composer's music.

Paulus, who died of a stroke at the age of 65, wrote four works for organ and orchestra — this one, the third, a commission from the Dallas Organ Competition in 2003. And although Jacobs had premiered the fourth concerto a few years before the composer's death, the organist was performing the 2003 piece for the first time on Thursday evening, with guest conductor Giancarlo Guerrero on the podium.

It's difficult to write a piece for solo instrument and orchestra when the featured instrument is something of an orchestra in itself. Paulus did an excellent job of integrating the two, merging their respective timbres in the concerto's more ruminative passages, and skillfully contrasting them at other times. The composer brought a fresh take on stock organ gestures to this piece — the requisite pedal solos, the inevitable toccata — and used a large percussion section to thrilling effect. Conversations between soloist and instrumentalists abound throughout the work, but especially witty repartée took place between Jacobs and those guys in the back row.

The *Grand Concerto* is decidedly episodic, but its fast-changing topics succeed one another with an engaging inevitability. Cellos, basses, and organ begin the piece with halting gestures, then the music creeps upward in a crescendo that involves the horns and the rest of the orchestra in turn. The organ's celestes (ranks of pipes intentionally tuned sharp to one another to produce an acoustic shimmering) provided a lovely cushion between flutes and contrabasses.

Then a dance emerges with brief, chattery interchanges between organ and percussion. Violins play lyrical lines over chromatic passages in the organ, and the brass organize a chorale.

Wistful wind solos launch the second movement, whose marking of "Austere — foreboding" only makes sense later in the narrative. After Jacobs' pedal solo, sprightly comments were exchanged, then sonorous, shifting chords led to a big climax. Paulus unravels that moment, backing the music off into a broad unison string melody. Two big orchestral strokes herald the coda — a further retreat involving a clarinet solo and finally, that foreboding in the form of ominous pizzicatos.

The finale starts with back-and-forth gestures between strings and percussion, then the organist begins a quasi-French toccata with alternating chords in the hands and a wide-ranging tune in the feet. Those manual figures kept Jacobs busy for some time while a striking trumpet solo (Lyle Steelman) and the sudden, broad appearance of a folk tune in the strings ("The Water is Wide," or "O Waly, Waly") seemed to come unbidden out of nowhere.

A break in the texture devolves into exchanges between pizzicato strings and percussion, then a big pedal solo ensues, soon joined by dueling snare drums. A moment of organ and orchestral chaos settles into a final, triumphant chord.

Paul Jacobs was coolly and totally in control of his solo role, efficiently changing registrations both by presets and quick, elegant stop pulling and retiring. His choice of combinations created fine balances with the ensemble, and his sensitive manipulation of the instrument's swell shades helped meld the sound of the organ with the orchestra. His tireless repetition of toccata figures propelled the final movement, and his flawless pedal solos added flair to the performance. Guerrero kept everything tidy, and the percussion section obviously had a fine time playing the hand Paulus dealt them.

The audience gave Jacobs a resounding ovation and got a dazzling Bach encore in return. For organists it was the Sinfonia to Cantata 29, for violinists the prelude to the E-Major Violin Partita. Jacobs dashed it off brilliantly, changing stops with what must have been his third hand.

Aaron Copland's picture postcard of a popular dance hall, *El Salón México*, was the amusing prelude to Friday evening's program, with its mashup of Mexican musical styles — and its parody of out-of-tune brass at the beginning. Guerrero led a rather fussy reading, conducting every rhythmic detail.

On the other hand, the conductor might well have asserted himself more in Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony at the end of the evening. Many soft passages lost energy and forward motion, and his attention to what was happening in the orchestra often seemed to be misdirected. At times — especially in the pizzicato movement — he took himself out of the picture entirely. Nonetheless, the symphony made the impression it always does, bringing the audience to its feet with a roar.

*Photo by Roger Mastroianni of an earlier appearance by Paul Jacobs with The Cleveland Orchestra.*

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