

Cleveland Orchestra plays Beethoven to a full Fridays@7 house (Jan. 19)

by Daniel Hathaway



The Cleveland Orchestra has been tweaking the format for its Fridays@7 concerts. They were originally conceived as hour-long, straight-through performances preceded and followed by non-classical genres of music performed in the lobbies in a party ambiance with food and drink. On January 19, the

concert — all-Beethoven — was nearly full-length and included an intermission, but as an innovation, it introduced informal conversations between orchestra musicians and Franz Welser-Möst. Severance Hall was packed with a multigenerational audience whose energy helped make the evening a celebration.

People seem to be evenly divided about whether they want to be talked to or not during a performance, but Friday's crowd seemed to lap up the opportunity to hear their music director field questions from violinist Isabel Trautwein, violist Lisa Boyko, and former Cleveland School of the Arts violist Adam Warner, who participated in a side-by-side with the Orchestra during an educational project several years ago and now plays in the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra.

Franz was funny and engaging in talking about the music of Beethoven, and how he prepares for a performance. He was especially forthcoming in his repartee with Warner: "Years ago, when you were *this* tall, I asked you what your career plans were. You told me, 'I want your job.'" Though some of Trautwein's unamplified questions got lost, by the second half, microphones appeared.

You might think that scheduling an all-Beethoven program between the Thursday and Saturday performances of Haydn's *The Seasons* might leave the Beethoven a bit under-rehearsed, but think again. The Orchestra's playing in the Overture to *The Creatures of Prometheus* and the First and Third Symphonies was polished, nuanced, and full of cleverly conceived and finely wrought ideas.

Welser-Möst underlined the evolution of Beethoven's orchestral works by using a reduced orchestra for the Overture and *Symphony No. 1*, and a full ensemble for *Symphony No. 3*. Apollonian though the first two are, the composer still indulges his mischievous side by beginning them with dissonant chords, turning the minuet of the *Symphony* into a proto-scherzo, and teasing the ear with a halting upward scale at the beginning of the finale before getting into the real key and tempo.

The Third *Symphony*, dubbed "Eroica" because of its original dedication to Napoleon (and vigorously scratched out of the title page of the score after Bonaparte crowned himself emperor), breaks old rules with élan. It's nearly an hour long — an unheard of duration at that point in time. The first movement doesn't seem to have a real theme until Beethoven begins developing its opening phrase, and then he can't stop messing with that idea, adding a new section in e-minor, the farthest key away from E-flat. And there's the little joke where the horn seems to come in two bars early for the recapitulation.

To balance the larger string section in this performance, Welser-Möst doubled the woodwind parts, which added extra color to the whole mix. While the First *Symphony* basked in classical purity, the "Eroica" swept along nobly in unhurried grandeur. The funeral march was precise and inexorable, the scherzo thrilling in its syncopations, and the finale exuberant — after Beethoven has seemingly assembled its main theme from a handful of pizzicato atoms.

It was thrilling to be part of a capacity crowd in Severance Hall, one that was well-stocked with young listeners and completely enraptured by the music. The ovation was long and loud, and the buzz continued even past the exits.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com January 23, 2018.

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