

Cleveland Orchestra Prometheus Project I: Eight Beethoven symphonies in four concerts

by David Kulma



Severance Hall was filled to the brim with Beethoven lovers for the first four installments of The Cleveland Orchestra's 100th-season-capping festival. Framed as an exploration of Ludwig van Beethoven's nine symphonies through ancient Greek myth, The Prometheus Project began with dazzling performances of the first eight symphonies and four overtures led by music director Franz

Welser-Möst from Thursday, May 10 through Sunday, May 13.

The festival concluded the following weekend with three performances of Beethoven's epochal Ninth Symphony and the grandiose *Große Fuge*. The whole five-concert extravaganza will be repeated on tour in Vienna from May 24-28 and Tokyo from June 2-7.

Composed around 200 years ago, Beethoven's symphonies arrived at a time of rising prestige for the stand-alone orchestral symphony. Ideals were changing for what art could mean.

As discussed in an engaging talk on Wednesday, May 9 between Welser-Möst and UNC Chapel Hill musicologist Mark Evan Bonds — introduced by wonderful questions from Case Western Reserve musicologist Francesca Brittan — Beethoven's symphonies became the main beneficiaries of a new way of hearing music. They demanded exegesis, regular rehearsals, and carefully rehearsed professional orchestras. And the world — with no signs of stopping — has taken up the challenge.

Welser-Möst easily matched the erudition and humor of the musicologists on Wednesday, showing how deeply he has thought about Beethoven, the symphonies, and his chosen frame of Prometheus. Multiple essays in the program book discuss the myth of the Titan who stole fire from the gods and gifted it to humanity as a metaphor for human enlightenment and progress alongside danger and responsibility. Fire can heat our homes, but it can also burn them down. The story also connects to individual freedom and self-determination, cementing Prometheus as a mythical revolutionary in Beethoven's time.



It's only a small step from Prometheus to Beethoven, who was seen in his time as overthrowing received musical values. The composer's personal creed affirmed his music as a humanitarian uplift amid his own immense struggles. His subsequent canonization has symbolized his work as a universal striving for freedom.

His labored-over works regularly shocked contemporary audiences on first hearing, though they quickly garnered repeat performances and rave reviews. Artists have never stopped using his music as a jumping-off point, a harbinger of the musical future. And as The Cleveland Orchestra showed with astounding virtuosity and stamina, Beethoven is impossible to ignore nearly 250 years after his birth.

Throughout the week, Welser-Möst molded lengthy paragraphs of vibrating granite out of Beethoven's carefully worked-out movements. Long-breathed, forward-moving performances made the symphonies electric and lithesome, their musical architecture clearly delineated by highly controlled dynamic contrasts. The musicians made beautiful, vibrant music, showing great care for tiny details.

Concert 1: Symphonies 1 and 3 (May 10)

The festival began with the Overture to *The Creatures of Prometheus*. As the introduction to Beethoven's only ballet — created in 1801 for Vienna's imperial court and its ballet master Salvatore Viganò — the work encapsulates its drama. After stark chords, the Orchestra shined in the softly lustrous opening and maintained a transparent

lightness in the swift-footed body of the overture. Not only the source for the theme of this festival, this ballet is a storehouse of ideas Beethoven would use later in his career, most notably in the Third Symphony.

Premiered in 1800, the *Symphony No. 1 in C* bears the imprints of the Classical style, and is shaped as a delightful romp. The first movement was full of smooth clarity and continuous phrasing. The not-quite-slow movement danced aristocratically, shining with a perky, smiling repose. The propulsive minuet was insistent, and the precise rocketing violin passages in the trio were played with utmost precision. The boisterous finale topped off the symphony with great fun with elan.

The *Symphony No. 3 in E-flat* was Beethoven's first major symphonic statement. Originally composed to celebrate Napoleon Bonaparte — a dedication Beethoven later famously excised in favor of the title *Eroica* — this heroic symphony clocks in at 45 minutes, a gargantuan timeframe for a symphony when it premiered in 1805.

Welser-Möst insistently raised the temperature, pushing the expansive first movement forward. The funeral march built beautifully to its ecstatic fugue amidst Frank Rosenwein's ravishing oboe solos. The rollicking scherzo was full of wit, while the horns (Carsten Duffin, Jesse McCormick, and Hans Clebsch) made the trio regal. The extended finale — based on *Prometheus* ballet music — was variously jovial, swashbuckling, and heart-rending. The Orchestra was glorious from start to finish.



Concert 2: Symphonies 4 and 7 (May 11)

Part of the incidental music for Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's play, the *Egmont* Overture recounts the whole plot of the drama. After a funereal introduction, the action

alternates between light, pretty melodies and thick, pained heavings. Welser-Möst and company gave a stunning reading, ending in a blaze of major-key glory.

The *Symphony No. 4 in B-flat* begins in the darkest of moods, then suddenly changes to a light but vigorous juxtaposition of perky and cantabile melodies. The stunning slow movement flowed from Welser-Möst's baton like the sun coming out of the clouds. The scherzo was a celebration, while the finale, taken at a ridiculously fast tempo, comedically swapped out light ideas for pounding chords. Undaunted by the hair-raising speed, bassoonist John Clouser and clarinetist Afendi Yusuf deserve high praise for their precise solo work.

The popular *Symphony No. 7 in A* brought the concert to a rip-roaring close. After the stately introduction, the Orchestra hammered out the grooving dotted rhythms of the first movement with ecstatic joy. The slow movement built to a roiling climax and a tempestuous fugue. Welser-Möst whipped up a scampering scherzo, its trio crowned with pealing trumpets. The whirling finale boiled over into joyful screams from the audience. In that moment, it was clear why Beethoven's music will live as long as orchestras give concerts.



Concert 3: Symphonies 8 and 5 (May 12)

The morose *Coriolan* Overture opened Saturday night's concert. Written for a play by Heinrich Joseph von Collin that retells Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, this desperately sad

music ends with deadening plucks and no hope in sight. The Orchestra played this torrent of drama with firm control.

Welser-Möst and the Orchestra brought an energetic vitality to the sunny first movement of the *Symphony No. 8 in F*. The delightful second movement happily ticked along with a little Vivaldi and fire here and there. The pompous minuet featured wonderful clarinet playing by Yusuf and glorious horn counterpoint from Duffin and McCormick. The finale was a joyful game of light humor that breaks down over and over, then winds its way back. The Orchestra played the whole work with a lively perkiness.

The quintessential *Symphony No. 5 in c* premiered in 1808, and its opening motive has never faded from human ears. Welser-Möst made a headlong journey of doom out of the first movement, its only respite Rosenwein's glorious oboe solo. The spellbinding second movement was a grand dance of singing lines, while the cantankerous scherzo roiled along through its hushed transition to the bright C-major finale that opens the door to salvation. Welser-Möst's ability to effectively control long-scale structure for maximum effect turned this symphony into an epic poem.

Concert 4: Symphonies 6 and 2 (May 13)

Welser-Möst gave his most supple reading of the cycle in *Symphony No. 6 in F*, "*Pastoral*." The Orchestra played the serene opening movement with a lovely, transparent sound. The scene by the brook unfolded with limpid grace. Wonderful wind solos and a powerfully droned trio depicted the country-folk with sprightly zest. Their happiness was interrupted by Paul Yancich's thunder-clapping timpani, and as the storm recedes, Beethoven slowly introduces the final movement with a lithe shepherd's song. Welser-Möst led this joyfully buoyant music with direction and purpose.

The *Symphony No. 2 in D* was the picture of fiery, classical pomp. The first movement swerves grandly from jumping, jovial themes to dark, minor moods, while the endlessly beautiful slow movement felt almost like a light waltz. The scherzo was both blasting and light, and the off-kilter flip and trill of the finale set off the lovely main tune and its brimstone climaxes. The Orchestra sent the fiery coda off with rocketing scales.

The massive, 15-minute *Leonore Overture No. 3* ended the afternoon. The largest of the four overtures written for the opera *Fidelio*, this one gives away the whole story. Its long introduction, big tunes, and grand build-ups showed off Welser-Möst and the Cleveland Orchestra's ability to shape enormously long crescendi leading to explosions of joy. Flutist Joshua Smith's arresting solo and Clouser's bassoon riposte were dazzling, while

trumpeter Michael Sachs was the star of the show for his powerful offstage solo. The fleet-footed coda — with some of Beethoven's most dramatic music — inspired awe.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com May 21, 2018.

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