

Cleveland Orchestra at Blossom with Storgårds & Frang (July 15)

by Delaney Meyers



The Cleveland Orchestra continued its crowd-pleasing summer season at Blossom Music Center on Sunday, July 15 with a fabulous concert featuring Finnish guest conductor John Storgårds and Norwegian violinist Vilde Frang.

The evening opened with George Antheil's optimistic *Over The Plains*, a concise, spirited work with a summery demeanor. As quoted in the program notes, Antheil describes the spirit of the work as "that of a young man walking alongside a covered wagon with his little family inside; moreover the young man would be audacious, as a young man making his home in the new west of a century ago probably would be."

The signature warm, rich tone of TCO's violin section shone through with the melody right away, and later the orchestra oscillated between moments of enchantment and moments of storminess. Storgårds, having recorded the piece with the BBC Philharmonic, was confident and detail-oriented as he pulled the more interesting tonalities out of its otherwise quaint, open harmonies. After a thundery section of the music, the brass sounded particularly strong as they rose through the rest of the orchestra, as if slowly waking up after a storm.

Vilde Frang was stunning in her nuanced and astute interpretation of Britten's dark, challenging *Violin Concerto* Op. 15. She entered the mysterious atmosphere of percussion and sighing string chords with a sweet, personal sound that immediately drew the listener in, partly out of necessity — this was intimate music in a large venue. Frang,

Storgårds, and the Orchestra played and interacted as one team, gracefully navigating Britten's many tempo transitions.

Frang's combination of grittiness and accuracy in the vivace section of the second movement was impressive. She often played with a pure, harmonic-like tone in this movement, which also featured a beautiful piccolo solo. The cadenza was set off by a dramatic orchestral outburst, Frang digging her bow into the strings with passion.

The cadenza must have excited the birds in the pavilion as well, because it was difficult to hear the violinist's delicate entrance into the Passacaglia over their incessant chirping. When the birds died down, and when Storgårds kept the Orchestra soft enough, Frang's playing was brilliant. She came through clearly in the hauntingly plaintive melody that ends the work, her vibrato tasteful and her long phrases flawless.



Schumann's "Spring Symphony," the composer's first symphonic work, was acoustically more suited to the space and was the highlight of the concert. Storgårds conducted in broad strokes, never micro-managing the ensemble but always showing just what he wanted in a no-nonsense interpretation. The strings came rolling out with perfectly-synchronized grace notes, and the blend in the winds and brass was gorgeous. The balance was excellent, Storgårds' favoring of the basses grounding Schumann's emotionally polarized music.

The *Larghetto* features a romantic, emotive melody with an undulating, syncopated accompaniment. Here, the birds made another appearance, this time as a pair, happily flitting through the pavilion dangerously close to audience members' heads.

Storgårds seamlessly transitioned the orchestra into the quintessentially Schumannian third movement, replete with tempo changes (*Scherzo: Molto vivace* — *Trio I: Molto piu*

vivace — Trio II — Coda: Come sopra ma un poco più lento — Quasi presto — Meno presto). The orchestra played the weightless, lilting chords of the rhythmically unstable waltz with ease, and Storgårds settled the Orchestra back into the trio tempo masterfully.

The finale, *allegro animato e grazioso*, again highlighted Storgårds' keen sense of timing, as well as the Orchestra's remarkable ensemble, as he led the violins tiptoeing back into the theme after a graceful moment of respite. The horns wowed with their melody, their blend luscious and full. Though I would have opted for more emphasis on dissonance, Storgårds' interpretation was fresh, engaging, and energizing — ending the evening in good spirits.

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