

Cleveland Orchestra plays live score for *Singin' in the Rain* at Blossom (July 14)

by Nicholas Stevens



The film-with-live-orchestra format has swept the U.S. of late because of its broad appeal. It boasts advantages over both the traditional open-air concert and the movie theater experience, uniting the vivid sound and fresh setting of the one with the narrative cohesion and thrilling visuals of the other. When a distinguished conductor leads one of the

world's greatest orchestras in one of history's greatest film musical scores, what could go wrong?

On July 14 at Blossom Music Center under the baton of Richard Kaufman, The Cleveland Orchestra played Nacio Herb Brown's timeless music from *Singin' in the Rain* with characteristic perfection. However, amplification issues and an inconsistent production approach proved distracting in an otherwise lovely performance.

The film was presented with its original orchestrations reconstructed by a team of arrangers from the independent specialist firm PGM Productions. Kaufman, known for his work in this vein, conducted a Cleveland Orchestra augmented by a drummer, a guitarist, and a full big-band saxophone section.

Singin' in the Rain stars Gene Kelly and Debbie Reynolds as singing actors who fall in love, navigate a changing industry, and outwit sabotage amid the silent-to-sound transition in Hollywood. From the opening credits through the final moments, principal trumpet Michael Sachs and his section-mates sounded terrific, reveling in the opportunity to play with jazzy brightness and vibrato. The audio issues began with the

first lines, uttered by an announcer at a film screening — the speech sounded garbled even inside the pavilion, and only when Kelly appeared did the words become clearer. (The production did not include subtitles.)

In a subsequent sequence depicting the protagonist's rise to fame, a harmonica solo — played from the recording — marked the unfolding of a persistent mystery: how did the producers decide which music to keep in the recording and which to move to the live orchestra, and why? The ever-excellent Joela Jones sat at a piano and celesta in front of Kaufman, yet at several points the sounds of keyboard instruments rang out from the recording instead. Further issues emerged as the characters launched into jazz numbers: the drum kit thundered, yet the saxophones received so little amplification that only a glance at the stage during intermission could confirm their presence and numbers.

Despite these problems with the amplification and mixing, the Orchestra sounded vital. Assistant principal cello Richard Weiss made a series of solos sound as dreamy as the summer sunset. Bass clarinetist Georg Klaas seized a brief moment in the spotlight and ran with it. English hornist Robert Walters played the solo in the sultry film-within-a-film nightclub scene with such impeccable technique and alluring style that it stood as a program highlight all by itself.

Singin' in the Rain simultaneously makes for an intuitive and a strange choice for adaptation to the live-orchestra concert format. Its underscore, the musical layer that does not clearly emanate from an in-film performance, falls silent for long periods. Its plot, which focuses on music-making and the difficulties of amplifying sound, will inevitably direct attention to any audio issues present in the performance itself. However, the Orchestra played beautifully, and the concert still made for a delightful evening. Audiovisual problems aside, it imparted some glorious feelings — and undoubtedly left the film's classic melodies lodged in hundreds of heads.

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