

Summers at Severance No. 1 with Herbert Blomstedt (July 27)

by Daniel Hathaway



At 45 minutes in length, the first of 2018's three Summers at Severance concerts may have been short, but guest conductor Herbert Blomstedt and The Cleveland Orchestra used their three quarters of an hour onstage to make a powerful experience out of a single work — Brahms' Fourth Symphony.

Conducting without a stick and never cracking open the small score on the podium, Blomstedt sculpted every detail of the piece, melding expressive, colorful lines into a pulsing musical organism.

Spry and wiry at 91, Blomstedt shares some characteristics with other seasoned conductors: he's well past the point of indulging in podium histrionics, and he doesn't need to physically demonstrate in performance everything he and the players agreed on in rehearsal. Making minimal gestures, he drew robust, multi-hued tones from the Orchestra one moment and whispering pianissimos the next, winding up outsized jabs at the ensemble only for the most climactic moments.

Though it took the Orchestra a moment or two to settle in after the initial sighing motive in the violins gets answered by downward scales in the winds, Blomstedt set and held a deliberate pace for the opening movement.

Mellifluous horns announced the slow movement, later to be graced by an affecting clarinet solo by Daniel McKelway and a rich cello section statement of the second theme.

The Scherzo was simply explosive, capped off by the cheerful din of Marc Damoulakis' triangle solos. But the most remarkable movement was the last, a passacaglia where Brahms saved his trombones for the finale just as Beethoven had done in his Fifth. Blomstedt trained a different color of light on each of its 30 variations, singling them out while still allowing the music to move inexorably forward. Among the many sonic highlights was the arresting flute solo by Marisela Seger.



A sizeable crowd turned out for the first Severance Hall concert of the summer, enjoying drinks and food on the patio before and after the performance. Inside the hall, they were eager to applaud after every movement. Finally, their enthusiasm built into a powerful ovation for Blomstedt and the Orchestra among multiple callbacks and standups for soloists and sections.

This couldn't have been an easy end of the week for The Cleveland Orchestra, but Friday evening's concert ended with an outburst of sheer joy. Hopefully that carried over to Saturday evening's concert at Blossom, when Blomstedt and the ensemble were due to repeat the Brahms and add Mozart's "Jupiter" Symphony.

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