

## Herbert Blomstedt leads two symphonies at Severance (Feb. 20)

by Daniel Hathaway



A favorite phrase musicians use to trim conductors down to size is to remind them that “the stick makes no sound.” Neither do the bare hands for that matter, but on Thursday, February 20 at Severance Hall, veteran conductor Herbert Blomstedt expertly shaped symphonies by Beethoven and Mendelssohn using minimal

but meaningful gestures that provided Cleveland Orchestra musicians with clear architectural plans, but left them plenty of room to work their magic.

Two symphonies on one program? Beethoven’s *Pastoral* and Mendelssohn’s *Scottish* both take their inspiration from nature yet are different enough that they made a satisfying pairing — and a relatively short program — on Thursday evening.

With the unopened score on his music desk, the 91-year-old conductor immediately established the “cheerful feelings” Beethoven experienced in arriving in the countryside. The second movement scene by the brook trickled along agreeably, and toward the end, flutist Joshua Smith, oboist Frank Rosenwein, and clarinetist Afendi Yusuf conjured birdsong that might have fooled an ornithologist.

The scherzo — again featuring fine wind solos — was incisive and light on its feet, and the interruption of a thunderstorm was as surprising as it could possibly be in a well-known work. A sense of utter calm settled in as the clouds cleared.

There’s plenty of colorful scene painting in this programmatic symphony that comes out even in prosaic performances, but Blomstedt teased out normally hidden details that made Beethoven 6 sound new and fresh.

In contrast to Beethoven's pictorial representation of a ramble in the Austrian countryside, Mendelssohn 3 conveys the composer's emotional impressions of a craggy, more strenuous hike in the Scottish Highlands. Its four movements are meant to be played without pause, giving the work a fine sense of sweep and unity.

Like an experienced tour guide, Herbert Blomstedt pointed out an abundance of striking features of the Scottish landscape as the symphony unfolded, but never at the expense of the whole arc of Mendelssohn's work. Throughout, conductor and orchestra were deeply engaged in a single mission. Deep mutual respect — dare we say even a sense of love — flowed from podium to players and back again during this remarkable evening at Severance Hall.

The larger-than-usual Thursday crowd responded with a long, ardent ovation.

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