

## Cleveland Orchestra at Blossom with Parameswaran & Cano (Aug. 17)

by Nicholas Stevens



Literal and metaphorical miles from the cool luxury of the concert hall, outdoor concerts can imply a looseness that extends beyond attire, seating options, and environmental sound. With crickets singing and picnic blankets unrolling, it seems only natural that musicians might relax as well, either in repertoire or level of performance. Not so for The Cleveland Orchestra, who were spot-on as ever in a recent Blossom program that avoided fizz and fanfare in favor of sober, engrossing American classics.

It takes confidence to open a concert with delicate deliberation, as assistant conductor Vinay Parameswaran did on Saturday, August 17 at the Blossom Pavilion. The opening of Ives's *Decoration Day*, at once a standalone piece and part of *A Symphony: New England Holidays*, calls for just the sort of hushed delivery that Parameswaran, intense and animated, seemed to pull straight from the rustling trees.

English hornist Robert Walters and principal clarinet Afendi Yusuf played with characteristic grace, and the entire ensemble showed restraint right up to the explosive march at the climax, a reminder of the horrors that make *Decoration Day* — now called *Memorial Day* — necessary. Even in this moment of heightened energy, the Orchestra kept their delivery snappy and synchronized. Parameswaran held firm at the false ending, which is almost designed to prompt premature applause, to usher in a wonderful and heartbreaking conclusion.

Bernstein's *Jeremiah Symphony* gave new principal horn Nathaniel Silberschlag a chance to show off in an opening solo, and he made the most of it, playing with steely brilliance and faultless phrasing. For the first of many times over the course of the evening, principal trumpet Michael Sachs and contrabassoonist Jonathan Sherwin proved to be power players.

Conducting from his head and shoulders as well as his arms, Parameswaran brought both precision and fire to the second movement. The finale found the trumpets sounding pristine and principal keyboard Joela Jones chiming in with perfectly judged piano chords — but the show mostly belonged to mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano. By turns stern and mournful according to the demands of the sacred text, Cano held the crowd in the palm of her hand as the orchestra faded behind her in a moment of descending pitch and volume. Her flawless final taper to silence seemed an inimitable moment of artistry, until Parameswaran conjured a conclusion of startling clarity from the orchestra.

Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances* makes good on both halves of its title, not always at the same time. Its first movement sandwiches meditative moods between more balletic motions. In a just world, Yusuf, Walters, principal oboe Frank Rosenwein, and especially guest alto saxophonist Steven Banks, would all have received bouquets at the end of the concert, so distinctive and unimpeachable were their solos. Parameswaran summoned sinister yet radiant chords from muted trumpets and trombones in the second movement, and allowed its waltz portion to remain eerily calm. (That's appropriate for a piece that was composed while its continent of origin burned in an escalating war.) A mid-movement slowdown gave the central portion of the finale a feverish quality, but its concluding dance of death roused a crowd bowled over by artistry.

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