

Cleveland Orchestra at Blossom with Jung-Min Amy Lee (Aug. 10)

by David Kulma



The Cleveland Orchestra is joined by dozens of international soloists each year, but it's always a wonderful experience to hear a member of the Orchestra step forward into the spotlight. On Saturday, August 10 at Blossom Music Center with guest conductor Asher Fisch, associate concertmaster Jung-Min Amy Lee showed off her amazing skill and musicality in Samuel Barber's *Violin Concerto* in a program that

also included works by Liszt and Brahms.

As the originator of the genre of the symphonic poem, Franz Liszt essayed twelve such works exploring different programmatic ideas. Those range from clear musical storylines to more abstract relationships that seem to follow Beethoven's description of his own "Pastoral" Symphony: "more an expression of feeling than painting." Liszt's new genre later inspired works by Smetana, Dvořák, Tchaikovsky, Strauss, and Sibelius, but his own symphonic poems are hit-or-miss.

Fisch brought Liszt's sixth symphonic poem to Blossom, an orchestrated and expanded version of his earlier piano work, *Mazeppa*. Meant to follow the title character's hellish horseback ride through his moral awakening to success as a military leader, it starts *in medias res* and proceeds through angry squeals of diminished chords and devilish trombone proclamations to end with a celebratory triumphal march. Fisch and the Orchestra brought ample clarity and directness to this bombastic piece, whose melodies and orchestration are memorable. But the composer really never knew when he had overstayed his welcome, even in symphonic works that last only fifteen minutes.

Barber's *Violin Concerto*, written in 1939, is probably the most recent entry in the genre to enter the standard repertoire, and there is no question why it did: the solo part is both electrifying and fiendishly difficult, but his infectious melodies are ones to savor. Lee brought real command to this work, playing with a wonderfully sonorous tone in all registers and giving each note its due. To top it off, her precise playing in the breathless finale was stunning, and Fisch and the Orchestra accompanied her beautifully. The dissonant climaxes were pungent, while Barber's gorgeous tunes were sumptuous or perky as the moment demanded. Oboist Frank Rosenwein's take on the major solo that opens the second movement showed his finely honed ability to bring out fascinating colors and subtleties of phrasing.

Saturday's performance of Brahms's *Symphony No. 1* was special. Fisch is a real Brahms conductor, and the Orchestra knows its Brahms better than almost anything. Fisch began by bringing out the molasses moodiness of the famous *Un poco sostenuto* opening. This pointed forward to the rest of the work, as he wonderfully sculpted the plangent slow movement and gave the intermezzo a pleasantly sleek run. The finale was powerful with its exciting tempo, especially in the coda. Especially notable were the regal solos by new principal horn Nathaniel Silberschlag, making his first appearance with the Orchestra.

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