

## Summers@Severance: Osmo Vänskä leads The Cleveland Orchestra (Aug. 16)

by David Kulma



As classical concerts have become more reverential in the past century or so, the seasoned concertgoer has been trained to applaud only at the end of a multi-movement work, usually accompanied by a hearty standing ovation and hollers of “Bravo!” Based on the applause that followed each movement of Mendelssohn’s *Italian Symphony* on the Cleveland Orchestra’s intermissionless program with guest conductor Osmo Vänskä on Friday, August 16, the Summers@Severance series is definitely bringing new listeners in to hear The Cleveland Orchestra.

The concert opened with Samuel Barber’s *Symphony No. 1*. Bringing the four movements of a standard symphony into a continuous span like Liszt’s B-minor Piano Sonata or Schubert’s *Wanderer Fantasy*, Barber created a dense and brooding Sibelian web that packs a powerful punch. His tuneful, neo-Romantic universe makes plenty of room for spikey chords, sprightly scherzos, and full-volume climaxes, while also opening up for expanses of great beauty — principal oboe Frank Rosenwein’s intensely lyrical solo was a highlight of the performance. Vänskä led the Orchestra with a sure hand and a keen understanding of the complex flow of this twenty-minute drama. The Clevelanders gave this symphony its American premiere in 1937, and it deserves a regular place in its repertoire.

It’s hard to make one’s mark on such a standard as Mendelssohn’s *Symphony No. 4*, but Vänskä and the Orchestra did just that with seemingly no tempo bends to wrench meaning from structural cadences. The tempo of the opening movement was on the comfortable side, and flowed beautifully without any modifications. Vänskä tends to make visually awkward gestures for the sake of phrasing, but in many places he

mimicked the beautiful, consistent river of music without making a visual beat. And the expressive phrasing he demanded of the ensemble was easily furnished by these wonderful musicians.

The gorgeous slow movement with its walking bass and the smooth scherzo were equally splendid, and the quicksilver *Saltarello* finale was miraculous — as fast and as cleanly precise as I've ever heard it. One hopes that the first time attendees who applauded so enthusiastically and often will come back for more musical magic at Severance Hall.

*Photo: Joel Larson*

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