

Cleveland Orchestra with Mälkki & Josefowicz (Feb. 8)

by Daniel Hathaway



Music is said to be a universal language, but it does speak with different accents. When you're playing music by Jean Sibelius, it's helpful to have a Finnish conductor on the podium, which is what made Susanna Mälkki's pair of Cleveland Orchestra concerts so lucid and communicative earlier this month.

Mälkki brought along two late 19th-century works by the celebrated Nordic composer, neither of them regular guests at Severance Hall. Though played fairly often in the 30s, 40s and 50s, *En Saga* was last performed under George Szell 55 years ago, and the First Symphony has only occasionally made it into playlists, most recently in a Blossom concert in 2016 led by Jahja Ling.

Although *En Saga* in Swedish means 'legend' or 'fairy tale,' Sibelius' 15-minute work comes with only the rumor of a narrative. Beginning with atmospheric strings and a big tune in bassoons doubled by bass pizzicatos, whatever the story is continues with conversations between climactic brass, jolly winds, and murmuring strings. A recurring dotted-rhythm figure replicates itself like a musical virus amid a series of wind solos and more broad tunes. A final clarinet solo (Daniel McKelway) over a cymbal roll leaves you guessing about how the tale ends — a question mark at the conclusion of a mysterious but affecting piece.

At the end of the evening, the symphony began where the tone poem ended, with an expressive clarinet solo, this time by Afendi Yusuf over a quiet timpani roll. Bright strings, harp and flutes initiated an *accelerando* on a six-note figure that would be repeated later and was instantly recognizable.

As the work unfolded, surprises waited around every corner in a piece that might have been too episodic for its own good had not each new idea been so fresh and alluring. Mälkki kept the forward progress alive by whipping up tremendous climaxes between passages of calm and stasis.

The intense and emotionally volatile second movement was relieved by the symphony's striking scherzo, its momentum established by the timpani and its recapitulation heralded by a growly bassoon lick.

Sibelius had yet more surprises in the finale, notably a big-hearted melody that Rachmaninoff might have admired, and a chaotic melee that remains unresolved at the end.

This was a wild ride, energetically goaded on by Mälkki and effected by a totally committed Cleveland Orchestra. The audience responded with an ardent ovation.



The middle of the evening witnessed Leila Josefowicz's masterful command of Oliver Knussen's *Violin Concerto*, a work written for Pinchas Zuckerman but one that the soloist has made her own through over 50 performances.

Cast in three movements — Recitative, Aria, and Gigue — beginning, ending, and connected by a high harmonic E, the work encompasses conversations

both wild and bittersweet, and challenges the soloist with virtuosic writing of daunting complexity. Josefowicz met those challenges with enough headroom to explore the smallest nuances in her part. Mälkki and the Orchestra surrounded her with transparent, collaborative playing, and the audience responded with an enthusiasm rare for a modern work.

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