

Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra and Chorus midwinter concert (Mar. 1)

by Timothy Robson



It came as no surprise that the March 1 Severance Hall concert by the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra Youth Chorus was an excellent affair. Leading fine performances of music mostly off the beaten track, conductor Vinay Parameswaran helped prove that gloomy predictions of classical music performance fading into oblivion are misplaced. The audience was large and enthusiastic — I suspect with many rightfully proud family members.

For the first time, the student ensembles piggy-backed on upcoming Cleveland Orchestra performances by sharing the Swiss soprano Martina Janková, who was featured on Sunday in Mendelssohn's *Hör' mein Bitten*. The soloist carries the weight of melody in the work, with the chorus filling in the musical texture.

Following an accompanied recitative, soprano and chorus sing one of the most beloved of choral works, known in English as "O For the Wings of a Dove." Janková has a silvery, pure voice, eloquent phrasing, and enough power to carry over an orchestra. The chorus gave an enchanting performance, singing in tune with well-blended tone, and making the most of their short sections between solos, although the preponderance of sopranos and altos sometimes overbalanced the lower voices. The orchestra seemed a bit scrappy at the beginning, but soon settled in and were excellent collaborators.

The program book didn't indicate that the performance of Arvo Pärt's *In Principio* was a Cleveland premiere, but there cannot have been many prior performances here. It seemed tailor-made for these ensembles, with its bold declamation of the Latin text from the first fourteen verses of the Gospel of John. There are five sections, each strikingly different musically. The first is syllabic, sung in unison against swirling orchestrations, punctuated by fanfares. In the second, the text is broken into individual syllables with

space between, while the orchestra plays folk-like ostinato passages reminiscent of Janáček. The third adds simple choral harmonies to the syllabic declamation.

The sopranos did an excellent job with Pärt's extremely high tessitura and long notes in the difficult fourth movement, while the orchestra played sustained chords, interrupted by harsh statements in the bass registers. The effect was like a lumbering procession. The final movement builds to a magnificent climax, again using the words as declamation, but the work ends quietly, with an intimate expression of praise to God. The performance was serene, yet with an ominous feeling.



The 1945 suite from Stravinsky's 1910 ballet *The Firebird* ended the program. This performance was on a very high level, especially due to the excellent principal players who took the many solos in Stravinsky's rhythmically complex score.

The Orchestra's ferocious attack at the beginning of the "Infernal Dance" almost levitated the audience from their seats. With precise directions, Parameswaran carefully built the final crescendo in the last movement to a brilliant climax, showing his ability to make a student group shine to their highest capacity.

Photos: Martina Janková by Marcus Senn. COYO and COYC by Roger Mastroianni (from a 2019 performance).

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