

The Cleveland Orchestra: *A New Century, Vol. 1* — CD Review

by Jarrett Hoffman

The Cleveland Orchestra is launching its own record label with a major release. Having turned 100 during the 2018-19 season, the ensemble looks ahead with *A New Century*. The six works across three discs were recorded in concert in Severance Hall under the baton of Music Director Franz Welser-Möst from 2017 to 2019.

Curated by Welser-Möst, each disc pairs older with newer: Ludwig van Beethoven and Edgar Varèse (Volume One), Johannes Maria Staud and Richard Strauss (Volume Two), and Bernd Richard Deutsch and Sergei Prokofiev (Volume Three).

At the moment, Volume One is all that's widely available to stream. (All three *can* be heard on Apple Music or downloaded on iTunes, and a deluxe box set comes out on June 5. Check out a handy rundown of your streaming and purchasing options [here](#).)

Disc One begins with Beethoven's five-movement *String Quartet No. 15* in new clothes — a version for string orchestra arranged by Welser-Möst. Here the addition of the bass section makes Beethoven's low register really bloom. And as a whole, the larger forces bring extra warmth to the already cozy second movement, and lend a more epic, cinematic quality to the famous third. A beautiful little nugget of solo playing comes in the fourth movement, which ends with a cadenza from the concertmaster. It makes you wish that Beethoven's writing lent itself to more alternation between solo sections and full strings.

Of special note is that third movement, the "holy song of thanksgiving of a convalescent to the Deity," written after the composer recovered from a serious illness. No matter the number of players, it's Beethoven at his most breathtakingly

spiritual, and it inspires Welser-Möst and The Cleveland Orchestra's most stunning performance on a stunning album.

Some ensembles might trip over themselves in the added heft of this instrumentation, but not Cleveland. Dynamic contrasts are well-defined, and in every bit of interplay the musicians are fleet of foot — or finger. Scrunch your eyebrows, listen back several times, and only very rarely on this disc will you notice the tiniest bit of asynchrony.

The impressive fact that these are live performances could be made clearer in the (virtual) packaging. Listeners should expect the special intimacy that this type of format brings — the sounds of the players breathing in musically, the slight murmur of an audience.

I mentioned earlier that each volume of this set pairs newer and older works. “New” is of course a relative term. The works by Staud and Deutsch on Discs Two and Three were premiered within the past five years and are recorded here for the first time. Varèse's *Amériques*, which closes Disc One, was premiered in 1926, almost a century ago.

And still, *Amériques* sounds very modern, with uncanny combinations of timbre and a unique approach to melody and rhythm. Where the Beethoven is varied in mood, the Varèse hones in on a single feeling — unsettled, bewildered — and colors it in different shades. Sometimes the composer evokes something dark and unseen. Other times, a dark, subtle sense of humor comes through in a brass slide or a spare texture. Through those nuances, Welser-Möst shapes an impressive arc, and players too numerous to name give evocative and technically impressive solos.

Beethoven and Varèse make for a bold, stark, balanced pairing. It will be fascinating to hear what comes next from Staud and Strauss.

You can read our reviews of The Cleveland Orchestra performing the Beethoven [here](#) (by Daniel Hathaway from July 2019) and the Varèse [here](#) (by Robert Rollin from May 2017).

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