

CD Review —
The Cleveland Orchestra:
A New Century, Vol. 2

by Jarrett Hoffman



From Franz Welser-Möst and The Cleveland Orchestra comes *A New Century*, a three-disc, live album that inaugurates the ensemble’s new record label. Each disc matches a newer work with an older one, and in Volume Two, we find another fascinating pairing: one piece written after a trip to Italy, the other born out of a horror story.

That story is Algernon Blackwood’s *The Willows*, which inspired Johannes Maria Staud’s unmistakably eerie *Stromab* (2017). Here, that co-commission from The Cleveland Orchestra receives its world premiere recording.

Staud’s atmosphere is intensely psychological, expressed through the many colors of a gigantic orchestra. A particular highlight is the lithe middle section that sighs with glissandos and purrs with flutter tongues, all while something ominous hovers nearby. The conclusion is an impressive solo from the bass clarinet — wild, frantic, and in the end, piercing — that will take your breath away.

The final 40 minutes of the disc belong to Richard Strauss’s first tone poem, *Aus Italien*. It begins with an uncanny echo of *Stromab*: in both pieces, the contrabassoon and double bass are important figures in an opening unison. Staud assigns them a deeply low D, and Strauss a G just above that — a rise of a perfect fourth, as if one composer is resolving to the next.

That idea of resolution also applies to mood. Strauss’s first movement, “On the Roman Campagna,” ushers in a warm consonance and a sense of distance entirely at odds with *Stromab*. This is a landscape painting, captured with elegance and a patient, rewarding arc by The Cleveland Orchestra. Still, landscapes aren’t particularly known

for grabbing their viewers by the collar, and first movements are first impressions. Perhaps that's why this piece is neglected among Strauss's tone poems.

Tension, passion, and playfulness abound as the piece goes on. Most memorable is the third movement, "At the Beach at Sorrento," which enchants here with translucent textures and silky, effortless playing. The soloists strike the perfect balance between taking the spotlight and remaining part of something larger than themselves.

In the finale, "Neapolitan Folk Life," which quotes the tune *Funiculi, Funiculà*, one moment stands out as a particular feat from this orchestra: a long, lightning-quick run built in interlocking pieces, full of Strauss's distinctive chromatic twists, and executed to perfection. And for this listener, the razzle-dazzle of the closing bars brings to mind memories of instant applause from rooms full of people.

Volumes One and Two of A New Century are now widely available for streaming, to be joined by Volume Three on June 5. That date also marks the release of the physical box set. Click [here](#) to browse your listening and purchasing options.

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