

**Cleveland Orchestra's *In Focus 7*  
marks COVID-19 anniversary with  
emotional Shostakovich and Messiaen**

by Daniel Hathaway



Episode 7 of The Cleveland Orchestra's pre-recorded *In Focus* series is the shortest so far, clocking in at only 37 minutes. But the emotional impact of Dmitri Shostakovich's bleak *Chamber Symphony in c* followed by the calm, shimmering hopefulness of Olivier Messiaen's *Le Christ, lumière du Paradis* (from *Éclairs sur l'au-Delà*) is out of all

proportion to the length of the music.

The Shostakovich is an arrangement by Rudolf Barshai for string orchestra of the composer's *String Quartet No. 8*, a work directly inspired by the firebombing of Dresden, an attack toward the end of World War II that claimed more victims than Hiroshima. Premiered in 1960, the quartet has also been seen as the composer's personal epitaph, although the Soviet authorities had it dedicated "to the victims of fascism and the war."

The Messiaen is the final movement of the composer's last composition, commissioned by the New York Philharmonic, and premiered in 1992, half a year after Messiaen's death. The title of the whole, eleven-movement work translates as "Lightning over the Beyond," the movement itself as "Christ, the light of Paradise."

Franz Welser-Möst noted in his introductory remarks that this program marked the anniversary of the arrival of the pandemic, and that the hopeful, transcendent nature of the Messiaen offered a response to the despair of the Shostakovich.

The full string sections of the orchestra were spread out strategically over the Severance Hall stage for the Shostakovich. An elaborate enclosure around the podium allowed Welser-Möst to unmask himself and transmit more subtle facial cues to the players (no doubt this Plexiglass structure will become a fixture of the new normal when live audiences are welcomed again).



Although the quartet version of the Shostakovich can achieve a fearsome intensity, the sheer weight of the string tone in this performance is so glorious and resonant that it nearly but not entirely masks the elemental sadness of Shostakovich's music. The opening movement with its stern, grey counterpoint gives way to the rollicking rhythms of Shostakovich's "Jewish theme," followed by a frenzy of fiddles and a mawkish waltz rondo. Lovely solos by violinist Peter Otto and cellist Richard Weiss float above the last movement's fugal elegy.

The string sections shed the double basses and most of the cellos as a sudden shift of timbres created Messiaen's feeling of timelessness stretching into eternity. Three triangles trilled almost imperceptibly under the long, complex chords.

This was an evocative program, sensitively chosen and skillfully performed. Messiaen's music may not represent everybody's vision of hope after despair, but it did the job on this occasion.



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