

Cleveland Orchestra: *In Focus 9* with percussionist Marc Damoulakis

by Daniel Hathaway



Marc Damoulakis' performance of *Conjurer*, John Corigliano's percussion concerto, may well go down as one of the most spectacular events of the COVID-19 era.

In Episode 9 of The Cleveland Orchestra's *In Focus* series, its principal percussionist dazzled both eye and ear with the 40-minute work. Written for Evelyn Glennie and

commissioned by seven orchestras, *Conjurer* deployed a vast collection of instruments across the Severance Hall stage as it brought Damoulakis from his usual spot in the back row to front and center.

Visiting setups that resembled elaborate *mis en place* installations for celebrity chefs, Damoulakis began on stage right with wooden instruments (including a five-octave marimba and a rack of wooden objects that resembled jellyfish being hung out to dry), moved to center stage for metal ones (chimes, vibraphone, suspended cymbal), and



finally to stage left for a variety of drums (West African talking drum, timpani, bass drum). Corigliano charmingly named his three movements “Wood,” “Metal,” and “Skins.”

Damoulakis’ non-stop conversations with the Orchestra ranged from the lyrical (Corigliano can’t help himself) to the jazzy (a spirited dialogue between timpani and strings), his movements from the subtle (simultaneously bowed and struck vibraphone keys and flawless mallet work) to the acrobatic (in one quick 360-degree turn during his final cadenza, he connected with every drum within reach).



Presiding from his plexiglass booth, music director Franz Welser-Möst neatly kept everything in motion. Solos by concertmaster Peter Otto and others changed up the textures.

Dvořák’s String Quintet No. 2 began *Fusion 9* with mellifluous textures, singing lines, and carefully calibrated dynamics. Already conceived for string quartet and bass, its performance by full string orchestra required no further arranging. The sound of the strings was rich and full, especially in its gentle Scherzo and the exuberant Finale, and the Quintet made a highly agreeable traveling companion for the Corigliano.

Several bonus videos — “Building the Architecture of a Composition,” “Becoming the Conjuror,” and “Crafting Conjuror” explore the percussion concerto from the point of view of composer and soloist.

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