

Cleveland Orchestra *In Focus 11*: Intimate Mozart, Complex Berg

by Daniel Hathaway



Much had changed in the 130-some years that separate Wolfgang Amadé Mozart's Vienna from that of Alban Berg. The Cleveland Orchestra titled episode 11 of its *In Focus* digital series "Order and Disorder," presumably to contrast Mozart's well-behaved, Enlightenment-inspired *Clarinet Quintet* from 1789 with the societal chaos reflected musically in Berg's *Lyric Suite*, three of the six movements from the composer's 1925-1926 *String Quartet* that he arranged for full string orchestra in 1928.

Music director Franz Welser-Möst set the stage in his introductory video remarks, describing the Berg era as "the 'Roaring 20s' aftershock of World War I, a blooming of musical styles never experienced before or since."

While composers were trying out this plethora of musical styles, they were also exploring sensuality and having affairs, as Berg was with Hanna Fuchs. The composer expressed that by including waltzes — the only dance where couples were allowed to touch — in each of his provocatively titled movements: *Allegretto gioviale*, *Allegro misterioso – Trio estatico*, and *Largo desolato*.

Berg's music is atonal and restless, but also lush and sonorous — and difficult to put across. After the performance, Welser-Möst returned to compare it to a Picasso painting. "It's distorted, but when you engage with it, you appreciate its beauty." He went on to say that the Orchestra spent a total of 3-½ hours rehearsing the 14-minute work, which allowed the colors and sensuality of the music to come out once its difficulty was overcome. "Playing this music is like being on drugs and swimming in a pool of emotions. You get drowned in it, but that's exactly what Berg wanted."

Introducing the Mozart, which came first on the program, clarinetist Afendi Yusuf noted that the composer and his favored clarinetist Anton Stadler were fellow Freemasons, that Mozart's writing was informed by his operatic style. He also remarked about the composer's ability to balance joy and suffering, and to quickly turn the corner from tragedy to joy.

Backed up by violet lighting, Yusuf and the ensemble (Stephen Rose and Jeanne Preucil Rose, violins, Lynne Ramsey, viola, and Mark Kosower, cello) gave a flawless performance of the Quintet. Yusuf was suave, but assertive when he needed to be, and he and Stephen Rose — as the clarinetist predicted — were so much in the same groove that they could finish each other's sentences.

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