

Cleveland Orchestra: “Mozart in the Meadows” (July 11)

by Peter Feher



It seems like every orchestra will be doing its version of Mozart in the great outdoors this summer, an old-fashioned program that has recently found new life. The combination of open-air venue, fewer musicians on stage, and repertoire at the ready seems to satisfy the pandemic equation.

Practical reasons aside, there aren't many ensembles who can put together an all-Mozart evening as elegantly as The Cleveland Orchestra.

Back at Blossom Music Center after a weekend of fireworks and Fourth of July concerts, the Orchestra settled into the kind of refined playing it knows. Jane Glover conducted the July 11 program, and pianist Conrad Tao was the surprise soloist (replacing Benjamin Grosvenor, who was caught up in pandemic travel restrictions).

Tao was an intriguing replacement because he has something of a Mozart aura going himself. The 27-year-old touts a wunderkind's biography — recital debut at age 4, concerto debut at age 8. He played violin for a time and now is turning increasingly to composition. Even as a teenager, he could be counted on to pinch-hit for soloists who had to bow out last minute.

The soloist acknowledged an affinity for Mozart with his choice of music on Sunday. His replacement piece, *Concerto No. 23*, was a favorite of the composer himself, one of a handful of works he set aside “for myself or for a small circle of music lovers and connoisseurs.” The work's Adagio signals a specialness on its own, the only movement in Mozart's entire output set in f-sharp minor.

Tao brought considerable knowledge to bear on the solo part. What's more, he understood that any knowledge should be in service to the expressiveness of the piece. But the result was heavy at times and put undue pressure on the music. He traced every piano figuration — scales up and down, passages in octaves and in thirds — with the same level of intensity, first cerebral, then emotional. The charm of Mozart's music, however prodigious, lies in creating the opposite effect, an impression of easy inevitability.

But maybe breaking the bounds of Mozart was the point. In the Allegro first movement, Tao spun out a rhapsodic cadenza, inspired by the occasional blue note in the composer's original but going far beyond the 18th century. The pianist's cerebral approach worked wonders for his encore, Brahms's *Intermezzo in E Major, Op. 116, No. 4*. If Tao fit the Mozart mold for a time, there was an element of growing out of it to this performance.

Glover brought the lightness to the evening from the podium, leading large gestures while letting the Orchestra do its thing. The string sections played into a precise, quartet-like sound on the program's opener, the *Divertimento in D Major, K. 136*. The first and second violins tossed phrases back and forth, while the basses rounded out the cello part.

Winds joined in for the *Symphony No. 40*, coloring some of the piece's more dramatic moments. Flute, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons took up the anxious three-note motif that opens the work and transformed it into a chirpy two-note figure by the second movement Andante. Glover and the Orchestra kept the contrasts within reason, even as the symphony shades into romanticism.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com July 27, 2021.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)