

Cleveland Orchestra at Blossom: Blomstedt conducts Beethoven 7 (Aug. 1)

by Peter Feher



From the podium, Herbert Blomstedt is always proving that there are new insights to be found in even the most well-trod pieces.

The 94-year-old Swedish American conductor, whose big American post was with the San Francisco Symphony several decades ago, returned to Blossom Music Center on Sunday,

August 1, with the kind of austere program only he can pull off.

Blomstedt led The Cleveland Orchestra in two Beethoven works, both “lasts” in a way. The Seventh Symphony debuted on effectively the last concert Beethoven would conduct, and the Fourth Piano Concerto marked the final time the composer would star as soloist.

Pianist Garrick Ohlsson handled Sunday’s concerto masterfully, but the real showcase for the evening was the Seventh Symphony. Conductor and Orchestra brought to the piece some of the madman energy that’s been associated with Beethoven’s music, from Richard Wagner to *A Clockwork Orange*. Timpani and brass rang out in the gallop of the first movement, and the whole ensemble was ratcheted up to triple forte by the end of the fourth.

But Blomstedt worked the piece into a frenzy not through wild gesticulations but with absolute precision and efficiency. He set the heartbeat of the Allegretto going, then

shifted his attention to other things — tracing the melody that starts in the violas and cellos, cueing each successive wind entrance. And when each section had fallen away, the pulse was still there, which Blomstedt picked up at the movement's end and guided to an unsettling close.

There's a level of trust involved with this kind of music-making, and few ensembles are as rock solid as The Cleveland Orchestra. Occasionally, Blomstedt got into the details of a musical line — shaping every turn in the opening oboe melody, say. But he was just as happy to defer to the principal musicians. Flutist Joshua Smith and oboist Frank Rosenwein led the tricky transition from introduction to first movement proper and spun excellent solos throughout.



The Beethoven that emerged from this interpretation was simple yet all the more striking. Few moments in music are as boldly unadorned as the B section of this symphony's third movement — two notes back and forth, little more. But with conductor and orchestra moving as one, nothing could be more imposing.

The Fourth Concerto showed a gentler side of the composer and the musicians. Blomstedt, Ohlsson, and the Orchestra kept the piece collaborative, coordinating with ease the three pick-up notes that recur throughout the first movement. Even in virtuoso passages, Ohlsson was less showing off, more fitting his part into the ensemble texture — almost as if this were a piano trio or quartet, not a concerto.

Heavy wind and rain outside the Blossom pavilion were backdrops to the second and third movements, but the pyrotechnics onstage proceeded calmly.

Following the storm and his sparkling concerto turn, Ohlsson even stuck around in the audience for the symphony. Hearing what Blomstedt and the Orchestra did on the second half was perhaps the natural extension of the music-making on the first.

Photos by Roger Mastroianni courtesy of The Cleveland Orchestra.

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