

## Cleveland Women's Orchestra celebrates 87 years in style (Apr. 24)

by Stephanie Manning



After observing so many concerts from The Cleveland Orchestra — an ensemble that has long been lagging in its representation of women — it was refreshing to see their usual stage occupied by a group that reverses that gender discrepancy.

On April 24 at Severance Music Center, The Cleveland Women's Orchestra and conductor John Thomas Dodson presented a program that gave a healthy challenge for its players without getting too far out of their comfort zone.

An organization with a long and storied history, the group celebrated 87 years of music-making with this year's spring anniversary concert. Just like when it was founded in 1935, the Orchestra of today brings together women of all backgrounds who share a passion for music — from students at CIM and Oberlin, to professors in the middle of their careers, to those who have spent a lifetime as a musician.

Borodin's Overture to *Prince Igor* and Rimsky-Korsakov's Suite from *The Snow Maiden* — which opened the first and second half of the concert respectively — set the stage nicely for the pieces to follow. A bit of hesitancy from the woodwinds created some intonation issues, but it was in the tutti sections where the orchestra shone the brightest. The nicely-sized string section produced a sound that was rich and resonant, and Dodson consistently kept the ensemble on beat.

The most engaging pieces of the afternoon came with the addition of Antonio Pompa-Baldi, who serves as Distinguished Professor of Piano at CIM. The accomplished Italian-born soloist, who won the Cleveland International Piano Competition in 1999, brought a grace and fluidity to his playing that elevated the Orchestra in turn.

His first piece with the group was a Cleveland premiere — Luca Moscardi's *Concertino for Piano and Chamber Orchestra*, a lyrical four-movement work written during the height of Italy's struggles with the pandemic. Its lush and nostalgic aura, coupled with a theme-and-variations style throughout each movement, gave the impression of a movie score. Though Pompa-Baldi had no trouble being heard over the rest of the orchestra, some of the solos from the orchestra needed more projection. However, principal flute Jackie Wood consistently stood out of the texture to great effect.

Towards the end of the two-hour event — made longer by multiple stage changes and a generous intermission — the Orchestra still had plenty of energy for the final piece, Cécile Chaminade's *Concertstück for Piano and Orchestra*. Covering lots of ground on the keyboard, Pompa-Baldi was often aggressive with his accents, but his phrasing remained smooth, especially when he employed a lighter touch. The grand symphonic texture and a powerful brass chorale called upon all the group's strengths, inspiring their most passionate playing.

Looking forward to next year's 88th Anniversary Concert, some exciting changes are on the horizon for the group. Most importantly, the search for the next music director is coming to a close, with an announcement promised for the summer. Perhaps the next logical step for the Orchestra could be placing a woman on the podium.

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