

Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra delivers a spirited spring concert (May 8)

by Stephanie Manning



An immigrant mother, struggling with her sense of identity, makes a plea to her new homeland in the hopes that her newborn daughter will have an easier time navigating it. This sentiment, presented in musical form, was especially fitting for a concert on Mother's Day — not to mention one with a high percentage of mothers in the audience.

That is the narrative of Reena Esmail's *She Will Transform You*, which opened the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra's spring concert on May 8. Led by music director Vinay

Parameswaran at Severance Music Center, the young musicians were in fine form this past Sunday evening, and their performance delivered plenty of moments of outstanding musicianship.

The opening two pieces — the Esmail and Mendelsohn's *Verleih' uns Frieden* — also called on the talents of the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Chorus. At the podium, Parameswaran guided both groups with a steady hand, his movements easy to read but not overbearing. The winds and percussion built the minimalist texture of the Esmail with careful precision before adding the ethereal voices of the choir, which floated atop a shimmering string foundation.

But before Parameswaran put his hands down, the group transitioned immediately into the Mendelssohn, creating a surprisingly natural extension to the first piece. Standout playing from the divided cello and viola sections preserved the rich, meditative atmosphere, finding a shared harmonic language between two works composed almost 200 years apart.

Prokofiev's *Violin Concerto No. 1*, performed by concerto competition winner Moonhee Kim, then brought the Orchestra's musicality up a notch. The work was an uncommon and ambitious choice, and the result was fantastic. Kim appeared in complete technical and musical control, and her playing was as vibrant as her dress — a shock of bright pink. Orchestra and soloist each paid careful attention to the other, a relationship that allowed the work to flow naturally.

Kim rose to the concerto's many technical demands, continuing to project her sound even while strumming or using pizzicato — both with the right and left hand. Her upper-register harmonics towards the end of the first movement, accompanied by the upper woodwinds, were as delicate as a butterfly's wing, her fellow musicians supporting her sound without drowning it out.

After the thrilling second movement, the third eventually returns to the piece's opening D Major material, which Kim accentuated with quick vibrato and effortless trills at the very top of her range. The piece's conclusion is far from the typically flashy concerto ending, but the audience was eager to give her a well-deserved standing ovation.



The last piece on the program was also the last piece for Parameswaran, who concluded his fifth and final season as the Orchestra's music director. The musicians brought energy and passion to Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances*, a demanding work that called on the group's impressive flexibility. Wind section solo moments abound, and those from principal clarinet Megan Zhao and alto saxophonist Nalin Gupta were the standouts. No doubt many of the students will be sad to see Parameswaran go — but for both conductor and orchestra, this should be a concert to remember.

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