

The Cleveland Orchestra performs Schubert: light and dark collide (May 12)

by Stephanie Manning



Many musicians will remember exactly what they were rehearsing in March of 2020, when the music suddenly stopped. For The Cleveland Orchestra, that unlucky piece was Schubert's Symphony No. 9, which at the time was only heard by a private audience of staff members. More than two years later, the Orchestra finally gave the work the live performance it deserved on May 12 — and the seats at Severance Music Center were plenty full.

Conducted by Franz Welser-Möst, the Orchestra was in their element for the popular symphony, also known as “The Great” — a nickname born not out of a value designation, but to differentiate it from a shorter work of Schubert's also in C Major. Clocking in at just under an hour in total, the four demanding movements are a test of endurance, which prompted the woodwind section to enlist some assistant players.

The string section brought their all to this performance, characteristically filling the hall with their deep, resonant sound. Often in a back-and-forth conversation with the strings, the winds and brass were anchored by the warm sound of three trombones. Principal oboe Frank Rosenwein's crystal-clear tone and sensitive phrasing made his solo moments consistently outstanding, earning him a swell of enthusiastic cheers at the work's conclusion.

Welser-Möst favored large, circular gestures, while still ensuring that the dotted rhythms of the second movement were as crisp as ever. His brisk tempo in the third movement largely kept things flowing, though it couldn't prevent the repeated material from eventually feeling a bit stagnant. But the energy returned to maximum for the triumphant final movement, with the string section more than capable of keeping up despite the barrage of notes. In Schubert's time, multiple violinists reportedly refused to play it

because of its incredible difficulty — but Cleveland’s modern-day string section made it sound easy.

A master of using music as escapism, Schubert composed a symphony exuding triumph, hope, and joy despite the struggles of his personal life. This inner turmoil was outwardly represented during the first half of the program, by two enigmatic pieces that were quite the contrast to “The Great.”

Alban Berg’s *Three Pieces from Lyric Suite*, which the composer adapted for string orchestra, is chock full of musical codes and quotations to other works that Berg used to express his love to a certain woman. The Orchestra executed the techniques with precision, although the piece remained a bit mystifying — as a listening experience, it is far more dissonant than romantic.

A dark, brooding work in the same vein, Wolfgang Rihm’s *Verwandlung II* made the experience a bit more interesting with the addition of winds, brass, and percussion. The Orchestra was quick to respond to Welser-Möst, and their intonation was impeccable. And though the percussion section was small, it made a big impact thanks to some incredibly soft snare drum rolls and accented bongo playing from Thomas Sherwood.

After the dense and tricky first half, Schubert’s music felt like a balm to the soul. Clinging onto hope despite great personal sorrow — now that’s an attitude we can all understand.

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