

Michael Tilson Thomas and The Cleveland Orchestra at Severance (Ap. 28)

By Peter Feher



Many conductors are happy to travel from orchestra to orchestra with the same set of pieces. Not Michael Tilson Thomas, who brought a unique but instantly recognizable program to Severance Music Center over the weekend.

A visit from the San Francisco Symphony's music director laureate usually means interesting repertoire, stylish interpretations, and the prospect that he'll return next season.

If that workload and those artistic commitments would be exceptional from anyone else on the podium, this year they have to count as remarkable for Tilson Thomas, too.

The conductor announced his semi-retirement two months ago, going public with the details of a brain-cancer diagnosis but promising to keep making music all the same.

Understandably, he cut a subdued figure leading The Cleveland Orchestra on Thursday, April 28. He conserved his energy and favored minimal gestures, most often a single hand raised to quiet the musicians. Still, his influence on the ensemble's playing was profound, beginning with the choice of repertoire.

Benjamin Britten's ballet *The Prince of the Pagodas* is a work in need of a champion. The extracted suite, which the Orchestra played brilliantly and for the first time on Thursday, was only compiled by scholars after Britten's death in 1976. MTT mapped the performance with familiar drama and flair, the kind that comes automatically for the more famous ballets of the 20th century.

In fact, listeners might recognize elements of those better-known works in Britten's score, from sparkly orchestrations that resemble Ravel to a solo violin part that stands in for the princess of the story like *Scheherazade*. Another pervasive influence in modernist music, the Balinese gamelan, makes its way into the piece, with the piano, celesta, and

plenty of mallet percussion recreating the spectacle and sound of that Indonesian instrument.

Delivered with panache, Britten's ballet was the perfect end to an evening underpinned by a certain signature sensibility — the fashionably unfashionable. No one does this type of music better than MTT, who released *Masterpieces in Miniature*, an entire CD of compositions along these lines with the SF Symphony in 2014. His Cleveland concerts opened with a work that could have come straight from that album, the Polonaise from Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*, music that everyone knows but rarely gets the serious treatment the conductor and orchestra gave it.

Cellist Gautier Capuçon kept the program in that spirit with two solo works that had all the demands of a major concerto but none of the earnestness. He came on strong at the start of Gabriel Fauré's *Elegy*, but pulled back to a magical soft sound that still managed to project over the orchestra. He'd get even softer for his unaccompanied encore, Pablo Casals' arrangement of "The Song of the Birds."

Capuçon handled the solo part of Tchaikovsky's *Variations on a Rococo Theme* with such polish that, except for the out-and-out virtuosity of the finale, you wouldn't have suspected this was a tricky piece. He had an ideal match in assistant principal flute Jessica Sindell, whose playing was as extroverted as the cellist's where needed, and in MTT himself, who stayed in the background but still had everything to do with delivering the pleasure of the piece.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com May 5, 2022.

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