

The Cleveland Orchestra at Blossom: Rachmaninoff & Adams (Aug. 13)

by Peter Feher



The August 13 program at Blossom Music Center was a grand finale in all but name. The Cleveland Orchestra played the last classical concert of its summer season there (the group would save a couple of preview performances for *Severance* later in the month, ahead of setting out on its 2022 European tour), and the repertoire was exceptional and expansive to match the occasion.

Now, both pieces on Saturday might be called one thing, but they really sound like another. “Symphony” is a title that would fit Sergei Rachmaninoff’s *Piano Concerto No. 2*, as well as John Adams’ modern masterpiece for orchestra, *Harmonielehre*.

You could see the scope of Rachmaninoff’s work even before the music began. As suits a major concerto, The Cleveland Orchestra had full string sections out onstage, not just to accompany but to lay the lush foundation for this thick, melody-rich piece. At the podium, Giancarlo Guerrero took an active role in shaping the performance, more than comfortable at the head of this ensemble after years of serving as its principal guest conductor.

Pianist Daniil Trifonov was slated to make a splashy return as well with this program, but he had to withdraw at the last minute due to an arm injury. Fortunately, the Orchestra found another star soloist in Lukáš Vondráček, who had a perfectly crafted performance at the ready for what became his Cleveland debut.

Vondráček is currently in the midst of recording the complete cycle of Rachmaninoff’s concertos, and that level of polish shone through in his playing, which was authoritative but occasionally sounded distant. The combination of monster technique and extreme emotion requires a certain distance to pull off, and Vondráček was up for the challenge again and again, offering another staple of the Romantic repertoire, Frédéric Chopin’s

posthumous *Nocturne in c-sharp*, as his encore.

But amid the virtuosity, it's in the up-close, expressive moments that Rachmaninoff's concerto makes its biggest impact. The heartfelt return of the theme in the second movement, *Adagio sostenuto*, says more than any cadenza, and the entire ensemble drew out the melody in expertly moving fashion.



Sensitive, slow playing was the surprise highlight of John Adams' *Harmonielehre*, too. "Expressive" might not be the first word listeners or performers associated with this composer — though Adams worked hard to invest the repetitions of this piece with a level of emotion beyond the strictures of minimalism. The beautiful, unified sound of The Cleveland Orchestra, under Guerrero's direction, added an extra layer of depth to the brooding central section titled "The Anfortas Wound."

Things got off to a rocky start with an opening movement that began too fast and only found its balance once the tempo settled down. But by the finale, the Orchestra was in top form, making the gradual transition from delicate to dramatic that Adams demands in what might be the best 10 minutes of music he's ever written. "Meister Eckhardt and Quackie" is the title of this movement that hardly hints at the brilliance to come, yet somehow makes for the perfect ending.

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