

The Cleveland Orchestra with Tiberghien & Berman (Aug. 6)

by Peter Feher



Some music never goes out of style. The famous first bars of Edvard Grieg's *Piano Concerto* opened the program on August 6 at Blossom Music Center with a flourish. And the brilliance hardly let up after that, with The Cleveland Orchestra sounding superb in a pair of works that put symphonic tradition front and center.

Franz Schmidt's *Symphony*

No. 4 showcased the ensemble, under guest conductor Jonathan Berman, in the standard conventions of a not-so-standard piece. But at the start of the program, the musicians were equal partners to pianist Cédric Tiberghien, whose playing could be as bold as the full orchestra or as intimate as any instrumental solo.

Striking that balance is the essential challenge of every piano concerto, but few composers have ever succeeded quite like Grieg. If certain gestures have come to define the genre — pounding chords, rumbling low notes, runs up and down the keys — it's thanks in part to their dazzling deployment in this piece.

Tiberghien excelled in such virtuoso moments — the fury of notes he worked up in his first-movement cadenza were particularly impressive. But just as captivating was the atmosphere of calm he could create, taking extreme care with something as simple as the final broken chord that ends a phrase. Uniting it all were his near-flawless execution and an interpretation that accounted for every detail — virtues Tiberghien continued to demonstrate in miniature with his encore, "To Spring" from Grieg's *Lyric Pieces*.

The Orchestra far from took a backseat in this performance. Hornist Nathaniel Silberschlag and flutist Jessica Sindell were central characters who contributed expressive solos to the second and third movements, respectively. The entire ensemble was in top form for glorious tutti passages, capped off by Paul Yancich's timpani rolls, which began and ended the work decisively.

Punctuation was again in the hands of a single musician with Schmidt's Fourth Symphony. A nerve-racking, unaccompanied trumpet part, handled with composure by Lyle Steelman, bookends this meandering composition that most often favors a thick orchestral texture. Like wading through sections of Bruckner or Mahler, Schmidt's machinations unfold at a pace that seems both too slow and too quick and ultimately invite repeat study.

The Orchestra couldn't have asked for a more committed interpreter than Berman, who's in the midst of preparing all four of this composer's rarely heard symphonies for recording. The same qualities that sank Schmidt into obscurity in his era — he was writing 19th-century works in the 20th century — have inspired some contemporary interest.

Whether one performance can make a complete case for a lesser-known piece is another question. The Orchestra, as usual, found that special string sound on Saturday, capable of transforming any symphony from any century into something spectacular. Berman was a practiced hand at navigating the musicians through the unfamiliar score, though his direction didn't always translate to a larger structure for the piece. Listeners will need to return again and again for that.

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