

## The Cleveland Orchestra: Stravinsky and Britten (Nov. 25)

by Peter Feher



The Cleveland Orchestra started settling into their holiday routine over the weekend. Blockbuster pieces are always on the schedule at Severance Music Center after Thanksgiving, and the crowd-pleasing program on Friday, November 25 was no exception.

What was different — and all the more intriguing — was the package the music came in. The highlight of the evening was the complete score for Igor Stravinsky's *The Firebird*, a work with plenty of familiar moments but not often performed in full.

Blame the composer himself. Stravinsky produced three concert suites following the

ballet's rapturous 1910 premiere, the most famous of which, done in 1919, simplified his original orchestrations and told the *Firebird* story succinctly. The popularity only grew from there, with concision continuing to play a part in the piece's success. Disney would streamline the score even further for *Fantasia 2000*, crafting a nine-minute suite that was all climax and finale.

So, it can be rewarding to abandon efficiency and return to the musical source. The ballet takes its time in the opening scene, drawing out the eerie mood of the Introduction before segueing into the jittery "Dance of the Firebird." But you can also hear where Stravinsky's revisions would end up improving on the original. The underscoring for "Koschei's Death" interrupts what in the suites becomes a miraculous transition from the lament of the Berceuse to the optimism of the Finale.

Likewise, a huge ensemble was onstage Friday — three harps, loads of percussion, and extra brass in the wings — but the musicians weren't always deployed to maximum effect. Conductor Thomas Søndergård, here in his Cleveland debut, got the best playing

out of the Orchestra in the buildup to the “Infernal Dance,” maintaining suspense even as an expected explosion was coming.

The program opened in engaging but uneven fashion with Benjamin Britten’s Violin Concerto. This curious early work by the English composer has flashes of brilliance, and violinist Stefan Jackiw excelled in the piece’s fastest and liveliest passages. He was in his element tackling the technical demands of the second movement, a wild scherzo that ends in a cadenza covering the full range of effects — plucks, sighs, whispers, and wails — the violin can produce.

But Britten’s concerto also calls for virtuoso playing of a more uncomfortable sort. The solo writing frequently sends the violin into its highest register and then asks the instrument to stay there, sustaining a sound similar to the piccolos and glockenspiel that sometimes accompany. And certain stretches of the work leave the soloist exposed, such as the long, delicate, lyrical section at the close of the first movement that has only percussion and plucked notes as backing.

Jackiw approached each measure passionately, which let many moments shine but also bogged down the piece as a whole — in particular the third movement, a meandering Passacaglia with which Britten seemed to be experimenting. Even the best composers of the twentieth century could benefit time to time from some direction and editing.

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