

Mahler and Chin play to The Cleveland Orchestra's strengths (Feb. 9)

by Stephanie Manning



On February 9, concertgoers approaching Severance Music Center likely noticed the dramatic lighting choices — the building had been lit up in a deep red. With Mahler's Fifth Symphony on the program, it felt fitting. The composer's intense and passionate works are popular with both musicians and audiences, and an unsurprisingly crowded house packed Mandel Concert Hall for the occasion.

Not only was the music guaranteed to generate interest, but so was the conductor: young Finnish phenom Klaus Mäkelä, in his second consecutive week this season with The Cleveland Orchestra.

Audiences did not see much of Mäkelä the previous week, as illness forced him to bow out of three of four performances. But on Thursday evening, he was back and characteristically full of energy. With fluid, yet bouncy movements that make his style easily identifiable, the conductor is a fascinating watch on the podium. Frequent changes in stance and an unabashed expressiveness create the feeling that the beats are echoing through his body.

The musicians were responsive to Mäkelä's every move. In the opening piece, Unsuk Chin's *SPIRA — Concerto for Orchestra*, the orchestra was right with his baton, deftly navigating the piece's intricate sound world. Chin is methodically precise with her orchestration, but at twenty minutes, the work feels a bit long, as it becomes harder to track the subtle rhythmic and textural changes. Regardless, the performance was impressively executed. *SPIRA*'s demands on both solo playing and intricate coordination were well-matched to the Orchestra, whether it was the flashy, blink-and-you'll-miss-it woodwind passages or the careful blending of two vibraphones, whose wobbling vibrations twisted and changed as they drifted through the hall.

Mahler's Fifth Symphony expects just as much, if not more, commitment from its players. The work includes some of the most famous solos in the repertoire — like the soaring opening call from principal trumpet Michael Sachs, and the confidently elegant statements from principal horn Nathaniel Silberschlag — while also requiring 100% commitment from every musician on stage. Each section of the orchestra made the most out of their time in the spotlight, with the brass propelling the ensemble forward at the end of the first-movement funeral march and the cellos digging into their sweeping melody at the beginning of the second.

In the fourth-movement Adagietto, you couldn't have asked for a more blended string sound, and both strings and principal harp Trina Struble brought out every change in phrasing and color. Mäkelä's tempo was on the slower side, but occasionally the main theme would pick up enough speed to allow the romantic elements to peek through the melancholy.

In the epic finale, musicians and conductor fed off each other's energy, amplifying it as they drew the listeners closer in. It all culminated in the triumphant return of the D-Major brass chorale that first appears at the end of movement two, representing the turning back of the clock from the funeral march to a time when the protagonist was most youthful and exuberant.

Speaking of a trip to the past, Mäkelä's small book-bound score seemed intent on taking one, as it began stubbornly flipping back pages in the work's final stretch. Thankfully, the young conductor seemed nonplussed, fixing the issues quickly while keeping his eyes on the orchestra — focused only on the future.

Photo courtesy of Roger Mastroianni

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