

MTT makes magic with The Cleveland Orchestra (Apr. 13)

by Stephanie Manning



Both long-time listeners and recent fans likely found something to enjoy at Severance on April 13. The Cleveland Orchestra's program that weekend not only included a symphony that could win over many a first-time audience member, but also a work that hadn't been heard from the ensemble since 1930. In either case, the result was fantastic.

At the podium was conductor Michael Tilson Thomas, who brought a charming and nuanced interpretation to two lesser-known works by Debussy. *Jeux; poème dansé*, originally written for the Ballets Russes, is lush yet perpetually unsettled. The orchestra responded well to the music's indecisive shifts, flitting easily from one thing to the next — all underscored by some precise tamborine work from principal percussionist Marc Damoulakis.

With *Jeux's* inclusion of a number of auxiliary instruments came the opportunity for featuring moments across the wind and brass sections, a quality also present in the *Fantaisie for piano and orchestra* that followed. Pianist Leif Ove Andsnes ensured that none of important orchestral moments were lost or muddled, skillfully weaving his part into the texture rather than fighting for dominance. His soft touch and graceful flow were well-suited to Debussy's style, adding just the right amount of flourish to the composer's "music lit from behind." The work fit so well into the program that it was surprising to learn its last performance here was almost a century ago — a shorter wait next time would be well-deserved.

For his part, Tilson Thomas proved both a flexible and exacting coordinator. His sweeping baton let the ensemble's synergy speak for itself. Meanwhile, his left hand frequently signaled for the finer details — a pointed finger for an important cue, a come-hither motion to emphasize a crucial solo, and more until he was satisfied that the balance was just right. Mahler's *Symphony No. 1* received the same treatment. Frequent

attendees may remember hearing the work at Severance just over a year ago, in February 2022, but the attention to detail on Thursday's performance kept it from feeling overplayed.

The playful perfect-fourth “cuckoo” motif traded off easily between the clarinets and flutes before smoothly folding into the melody from the composer's “Ging heut' Morgen über's Feld.” The string section brought a joyful bounce to the second movement, evoking a country dance, and before the traditional furor of the finale, the musicians most impressed with their dynamic range in the third movement.



Beautifully quiet playing from principal musicians like bassist Maximilian Dimoff and bassoonist John Clouser set the stage for a great tone color change later in the movement, where the clarinet section (especially E-flat clarinetist Daniel McKelway) channeled the frenzied energy of a Klezmer band.

The multiple rounds of applause that followed were no surprise, especially given their frequency from earlier in the evening. In all cases, Tilson Thomas used the extra time generously to acknowledge sections around the orchestra for solo bows — a deliberately repeated acknowledgement of their fabulous playing.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com April 17, 2022.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)