

The Cleveland Orchestra: Rafael Payare excites with Shostakovich & Bernstein (Apr. 6)

by Peter Feher



The Russians won the Cold War, judging by The Cleveland Orchestra's stirring and subversive program at Severance Music Center earlier this month.

Dmitri Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 5* and Leonard Bernstein's *Symphony No. 2* ("The Age of Anxiety") went head-to-head in an exciting evening shot through with creative uncertainty. The fact that both pieces could have coexisted on a concert 60 years ago — specifically, the sort of concert Bernstein would have conducted with the New York Philharmonic during their 1959 tour of the Soviet Union — didn't ease the tension.

Still, The Cleveland Orchestra made an admirable effort at diplomacy, giving stellar performances of both works on Thursday, April 6. Guest conductor Rafael Payare whipped up the conflict, however, creating a sense of real stakes with a program that could have ended predictably.

Every interpretation of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony has made a point of hammering home the finale. Following the piece's 1937 premiere, the official Soviet line was that those repetitive final measures represented tragedy over triumph, effectively dispelling the darkness that had come in the movements before. The dissenting view, which has become the standard today, is to read the ending as brutal and coercive, and conductors typically communicate this by slowing the tempo to an unbearable degree, leaving little room to doubt what the composer "really meant."

Payare's achievement here was to combine both approaches for a uniquely disturbing conclusion. He blazed ahead in the finale — accelerating, in fact, from one bombastic section to the next — playing up the propagandistic spirit to the point of parody. You knew this wasn't headed for a happy ending, but you also felt powerless in the face of such violent persuasiveness.

The full-throttle approach didn't suit every moment of the symphony. Important melodies in the first and fourth movements got buried under accompaniment that was just too loud, and the Orchestra's sound didn't always match the wild gestures from the podium. When Payare pulled back, like for a woodwind solo in the scherzo or for the many quiet passages throughout the Largo, he held your attention with the same force that he would summon at the end of the evening.

Bernstein's *Symphony No. 2* opened the concert on a deadly serious note. An eerie, extended duet for two clarinets begins this strange 1949 piece, which resembles a theatrical work more than anything. Bernstein would, of course, find success writing for the stage, though he struggled his entire life to compose what he imagined would be a symphonic masterpiece that could make a similar impact.

Certainly, the most memorable features of his Second Symphony are also the most dramatic. There's a story that structures everything (adapted from W.H. Auden's poem *The Age of Anxiety*), the composer's characterful and colorful treatment of the orchestra, and a pianist who plays the part of protagonist. Bernstein couldn't have asked for a better ambassador for his piece than Thursday's soloist, Jean-Yves Thibaudet, who brought some much-needed levity to the proceedings.

But you also can't shake the sensation that what you're hearing isn't a symphony, especially when there's such a winning example that follows.

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