

Three perspectives on Americanness with The Cleveland Orchestra (Apr. 27)

by Stephanie Manning



Maybe it was the enduring popularity of Dvořák’s “New World.” Or the excitement of a world premiere. Or the chance to see three contrabass clarinets, three contrabassoons, and three tubas on stage. Whatever the reason, Mandel Concert Hall was packed to the gills on April 27 for an exciting concert by The Cleveland Orchestra.

With one Cleveland Orchestra premiere and one world premiere on the program, Antonín Dvořák’s *Symphony No. 9* almost seemed like the odd one out — yet it drew the evening together in some compelling ways. Though “New World” is familiar to many, the orchestra’s sparkling performance often made it feel just as exciting as a first listen. Every brass chorale was suitably grand, and the ensemble capped off the jaunty third movement with a stunningly rich last chord.

Some uncharacteristic cracks did show through in the second, with an ill-articulated opening, and a too-brisk tempo from music director Franz Welser-Möst. The whole symphony received this speedier interpretation, but it was this movement that was most affected, with the usually calm aura left feeling slightly on edge. Still, this was the exception and not the norm. The first movement, for example, was virtually recording-quality, with some impeccable playing all around.

Although Dvořák’s symphony was famously inspired by American musical traditions, the Czech composer was quick to resist any insinuations that he or his work were actually American. He knew that in time, great symphonies would come directly from the “New World.” But Dvořák likely could not have imagined the work that opened the program: Julius Eastman’s *Symphony No. 2*.

Eastman defied convention both in his identity — a Black, gay, minimalist composer in the 1970s — and his compositions. Often known for his provocative titles, Eastman instead planted his Second Symphony in the metaphorical with the name “The Faithful

Friend: The Lover Friend's Love for the Beloved." Written as a gift to a former lover, the symphony represents the couple through a few haunting duets, but the musical journey is far from straightforward. The orchestration is unusually large and low, yet Eastman keeps any potential cacophony contained — instead, the music is roiling with untapped power, leaving any solo voices to struggle their way to the surface. The musicians skillfully portrayed this eerie mood.

The program continued its exploration of American music with the world premiere of Wynton Marsalis's *Trumpet Concerto*. Written for principal trumpet Michael Sachs, the six-movement, 35-minute work pulls out all the stops by calling for virtually every style of trumpet playing — as well multiple trumpets. It's a daunting task, to be sure, but one that Sachs made look easy. He plays with the confidence that he will never put a foot (or a finger) wrong, with a sound that is adaptable for anything from orchestral excerpts to the blues.

The piece itself proved more interesting in the first half, its declamatory opening "March" experimenting with timbral effect in the winds and percussion. The uneven time signatures of "Mexican Son" required rapid-fire coordination with the front and back of the stage, while the gentler "Ballad" featured the lush quality of a Louis Armstrong jazz standard. The final three movements felt either too short or disjointed, particularly the fourth, where an interesting premise — demonstrating all kinds of mutes, from a cup mute to a bowler hat — became repetitive quickly. Nevertheless, the piece, the performance, and the Orchestra's decision to showcase new music all deserved the warm reception offered by the audience on Thursday.

Photo courtesy of Roger Mastroianni

Published on ClevelandClassical.com May 3, 2022.

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