

## ChamberFest Cleveland: “Carnival of the Animals” (June 24)

by Peter Feher



Camille Saint-Saëns forbade public performances of *The Carnival of the Animals* during his lifetime, but he might have made an exception for ChamberFest Cleveland this summer.

On June 24 at the Cleveland Institute of Music’s Kulas Hall, ChamberFest conjured some of the informal spirit of Saint-Saëns’ lighthearted work as it would have been heard in 1886 among the composer’s circle of intimates. It was in keeping with ChamberFest’s theme this season — “Lightness of Being” — even when the evening seemed elaborate and embellished and the music-making sounded seriously first-rate.

An all-star ensemble of ten instrumentalists, including featured pianists Roman Rabinovich and Orion Weiss, played an often supporting role in this larger production that also incorporated dance, costumes, and narration. Robin VanLear, founder of Cleveland’s annual Parade the Circle event, directed the assemblage of seasoned and student performers from Inlet Dance Theatre and Village Family Farms, who were sometimes dressed as animal characters and sometimes holding cutouts or puppets. And Jeremy Johnson, President & CEO of Cleveland’s Assembly for the Arts, read the accompanying verses by Ogden Nash, composed in 1949 to jazz up Saint-Saëns’ score.

The menagerie of styles and participants worked together in unexpected ways. At its best, this performance animated certain movements of *The Carnival of the Animals* that fall flat in other interpretations. “Tortoises,” not a noteworthy selection on its own, was transformed into a surprisingly moving spectacle by the simple, subdued gestures of a dancer behind a cardboard shell. “The Elephant,” a lumbering solo for double bass, here

became a graceful and gently humorous ballet, choreographed for a many-feet-tall pink puppet.

If not every moment succeeded visually, blame some of the less inspired writing in Saint-Saëns' suite, like the obvious, half-hearted musical effects in "Hens and Roosters" and "Kangaroos." When the music mattered, so did the dancing. All it took to enhance the atmosphere of "Aquarium" was the students wriggling down the aisles with some cutout fish. And for the most famous movement, "The Swan," Stephanie Roston danced a classical routine à la Anna Pavlova, while cellist Zlatomir Fung handled the melody exquisitely.

Fung was a standout performer throughout Saturday's program, which began with three modern chamber pieces that the musicians made audience-friendly. With Weiss at the piano, Fung came out blazing in the introduction of Lukas Foss' *Capriccio* and maintained that energy for six exhilarating minutes.

Violinist Diana Cohen set the stage for Salina Fisher's *Kintsugi*, describing the work as "musically a bit of a palate cleanser, like sea foam." This 2020 piece for piano trio has long stretches of dissonance, occasionally relieved by impressionistic textures and moments of intense lyrical playing. Cohen, along with cellist Nicholas Canellakis and Rabinovich at the piano, conveyed the beauty of the work by giving every measure the same detailed attention.

György Ligeti's *Six Bagatelles* for wind quintet (featuring flutist Denis Savelyev, oboist Cynthia Koledo DeAlmeida, clarinetist Ben Chen, hornist William Caballero, and bassoonist Andrew Brady) opened the concert and elicited a chuckle from the audience at the end of its first movement. For a piece that also dwells in dissonance, though nowhere near the style Ligeti would develop later in his career, getting a laugh is quite the accomplishment — and not a bad goal for classical musicians sometimes.

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