

The Cleveland Orchestra & Blossom Festival Chorus (July 1)

by Kevin McLaughlin



Undeterred by clouds in the sky, The Cleveland Orchestra let joy prevail on opening night of the 2023 Blossom Music Festival on Saturday, July 1. Somehow the weather held, families gathered, blankets came out, and Beethoven's jubilant message issued forth.

Susanna Mälkki was a persuasive presence on the podium, leading the orchestra, the Blossom Festival Chorus, and soloists in music by William Grant Still, Samuel Barber, and Ludwig van Beethoven.

Still's "Mother and Child," a slow movement from his 1943 *Suite for Violin and Piano* here arranged by the composer

for string orchestra, is a soft and sincere work alluding to folk song. Under Mälkki's direction, the strings gave a beautifully timbred, reverential reading.

Barber's *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, aided by soprano Felicia Moore's sunlit voice, also shielded us from the rain on this summer night. Sensations of James Agee's childhood porch scene were brought to life as uncannily as a faded photograph. Clarity of words was often lost, though to be fair, the Blossom stage is not the kindest of venues for singing. Mälkki and the Orchestra did their part to vivify Barber's imagery. The gently swaying, leisurely opening was nicely paced, and several of the winds (trumpeter Jack Sutte, flutist Joshua Smith, and clarinetist Daniel McKelway) made excellent storytellers.

Mälkki's undawdling conception of Beethoven's Ninth registered in a taut and driven performance. She kept the first movement's declamatory announcements crisp and lean.

The scherzo, sounding faster for its clarity, got much of its electricity from Mälkki's control of tempo and the orchestra's restraint — timpanist Paul Yancich, who personified strictness and gusto, had a lot to do with it. Tension's release came in the Adagio's simple lyricism, offering unhurried and unmannered beauty.

In the Finale, the excellent soloists — soprano Felicia Moore, mezzo-soprano Elizabeth DeShong, tenor Issachah Savage, and bass Soloman Howard — contributed to the rising mood of joy. Savage, who sang sans book (giving us the full benefit of his exultant frame of mind), brought unaffected enthusiasm. Moore, our sunlit protagonist in the Barber, seemed to radiate at an even higher intensity in the Beethoven. The Blossom Festival Chorus, directed by Lisa Wong, sang with passion tempered by common purpose. In the end, Mälkki and Beethoven were in charge, and joy had the final word.

It was also Paul Yancich's final concert, and his final bows, egged on by fans in the first row holding large cut-outs of his likeness, were another source of joy and pride.

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