

The Cleveland Orchestra: Bychkov, Labèque, and a premiere (Dec. 7)

by Kevin McLaughlin



Maybe it was the time of year, the familial ties of the visiting conductor and pianists, the anticipation of a new work, or maybe all of it, but somehow a rosy glow enveloped the Cleveland Orchestra concert on Thursday, December 7.

Semyon Bychkov's appearance on the podium, the U.S. premiere of Julian Anderson's *Symphony No. 2*, the return to Cleveland by the Labèque sisters — even

Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* Overture-Fantasy (normally a two-hankie affair) — all warmed the heart on this winter's night.

The idea for Anderson's symphony, subtitled "Prague Panoramas," stemmed not from a personal Czech connection or heritage, but rather from an artistic one. The composer took inspiration from a book he found of several panoramic, black-and-white images by Czech photographer Josef Sudek (1896-1976). The irony is that Anderson had not even visited Prague until late into the compositional process, so the Czech connection was less cultural than emotional.

We learned in a pre-concert conversation between the composer and the knowledgeable Caroline Oltmanns, head of Youngstown State's Piano Studies Department, that the symphony's Czech flavor, where it exists, resides at the subliminal level. (The composer said, "I will not be surprised if Czechs say they cannot hear Prague in it at all.")

The loud, *secco* chords in the beginning *may* suggest the architecture of Prague's famous bridges, the sprinkled fragments of Czech hymns ("Saint Wenceslas") *might* be audible, the general flow of the second movement *could* refer to Prague's Vltava river, and you

might have heard orchestrated “brawls” in the third movement alluding to tavern illustrations by Josef Lada — but probably not.

However, there is an extraordinary evocation of feeling, whether country-specific or something else, manifested in the work’s glorious and astonishing orchestral color. Combinations of celesta, piano, harps and bells, silvery flute harmonics, two English horns (how often do you see this?), a throaty bass clarinet, and muted brasses made for an extraordinary soundscape. But seeing may only have confused the listener. How was it possible that these instruments were supplying what we were hearing? What kind of timbral alchemy was this?

The treatment of bells throughout the symphony deserves special comment. Anderson discovered through the tourist organization Honest Guide to Prague that during World War II, 9,801 bells were removed from churches and town halls by the Nazis, who melted them down for use as raw material for weaponry. One of these bells (given the ceremonial number 9,801) was recast by locals and then returned to service. Using recordings and spectral analysis of the bell, Anderson incorporated its overtones into the fabric of the symphony.

One complaint. Having piqued our curiosity about the source material, wouldn’t a few more examples of Sudek’s photographs have been helpful to look at? (There was only one blurry and shrunken specimen in the program booklet.) Perhaps keepers of copyright or permissions prevented more.

It was nice to see and hear Katia and Marielle Labèque again, whose abilities and natural ebullience lent merriment to Bohuslav Martinů’s *Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra* and boosted the general celebratory atmosphere.

The concerto, not often performed, is a lot of fun. The first movement fairly leaps out of the starting gate, with buoyant optimism masking technical demands. Both players wore their responsibilities lightly, marshaling excitement and wit despite the clutches of notes. In concerto grosso fashion, they traded themes with the orchestra, the momentum not letting up until the operatic Adagio. The third movement restored good cheer in 3/8 time. At one point, Martinů makes a sneaky switch to 2/4 meter, evoking popular music (mariachi perhaps?) and preparing a joyous ending.

Tchaikovsky’s take on *Romeo and Juliet* doesn’t try to depict all the events of Shakespeare’s play. Instead, in sonata form fashion, we are introduced to principal characters and situations — Friar Laurence, the feud of the Capulets and the Montagues (swords and all), and the tragic love of the star-crossed lovers.

With commanding presence at the podium, Bychkov energized the orchestra with freshness, wonder, and sharp rhythmic detail. Nathaniel Silberschlag communicated passion and radiance in horn obligatos, and English hornist Robert Walters reminded anyone with a heartbeat of young love's thrill.

Photo by Roger Mastroianni

Published on ClevelandClassical.com December 12, 2023.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)