

Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra features Beethoven 5 at Severance (Nov. 12)

by Daniel Hathaway



Sooner or later, every orchestra has to come to terms with the Most Famous Symphony of Them All — Beethoven’s Fifth — and for Daniel Reith and the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra, that moment arrived at Severance Music Center on Sunday afternoon, November 12.

The challenges begin right at the beginning with the famous four-note motive that sounds so straightforward, but getting a stage full of musicians to play it together with the precise stops and starts that the composer writes into the score is anything but easy. “Just make any gesture at the beginning,” one conductor counseled a

student, advice that works like magic the first time around, but then things get complicated.

To their joint credit, and with only a single ensemble glitch, Reith and his players made it through those initial perils unscathed, producing an eventful first movement full of suspense, C-minor drama, and multiple climaxes crowned by fine horn playing.

The second movement calms things down with a visit to the key of A-flat major and a long, amiable theme, while the third returns to C-minor territory but with the added charm of a scherzo. The brave move by the COYO cellos and basses to re-establish C-minor with a virtuosic swirl of notes propelled the work into its triumphant C-major finale, joined by the trombones, who had waited patiently during three movements of unemployment to join the party.



To begin the afternoon, Reith led his ensemble in a grand and spacious performance of Brahms' *Academic Festival Overture* that ended with a sonorous chorus of the student song *Gaudeamus igitur*. Then came an atmospheric reading of Icelandic composer María Huld Markan Sigfúsdóttir's *Oceans* that featured long sustained lines in the winds and gentle marimba tones during its colorful ten-minute duration.

The midpoint of the afternoon brought a delightful performance of Walter Piston's *Suite from the Incredible Flutist*, the composer's only theater work, and a piece that fit COYO like a bespoke suit. The young musicians played Piston's lively ballet music with crispness and pizzazz but changed things up with a lush account of the "Tango of the Merchant's Daughters," mischievously written in 5/4 time.

A circus march with boisterous crowd noises and even a barking dog gave way to lovely flute and clarinet solos before the suite ended with an all-out "Polka Finale." Reith and his ensemble entered completely into the spirit of the piece, producing probably their best work so far this season.

Photos by Roger Mastroianni.

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