

Cleveland Orchestra kicks off 2023 holiday series with festive Severance concert (Dec. 13)

by Daniel Hathaway

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The Cleveland Orchestra will perform a series of heartwarming holiday concerts for the whole family through Dec. 23. (Photo by Roger Mastroianni) Roger Mastroianni



Dear Predictive Chatbot (or Siri, or Cortana, or other AI digital assistant),

How long should I wait before asking you to play me holiday music in December?

Dear Consumer,

It depends. It used to be proper to wait until the Thanksgiving dishes had been washed and put away (for the mercantile launch date, ask

me about Black Friday). But for some chain stores, Christmas goods begin appearing soon after the Fourth of July, when letters to the editor decrying the commercialization of the holidays also begin to proliferate.

Now I see from my GPS that you're writing from Cleveland. It's a safe bet to hold off on the *Noëls* and *Fa-la-la-las* until The Cleveland Orchestra and Chorus launch their Holiday Concerts. This year there are 14 of them, and my data suggest that these events are regarded by the local population as the true beginning of the Holiday season. Let the celebrations begin!

And so they did on Wednesday evening, December 13, at Severance Music Center, when Brett Mitchell led The Cleveland Orchestra and Cleveland Orchestra Chorus

(joined by the Cleveland State University Chorale and the College of Wooster Chorus) in a classy program of Christmas, Chanukah, and Winter-themed music starring the formidable Capathia Jenkins, who brought her personal vocal rizz to the party (thank you, Oxford English Dictionary, for the gift of that new word).

The engaging playlist began with a hearty welcome by conductor/emcee Brett Mitchell, a former Cleveland Orchestra assistant conductor, and an elaborate version of *O Come, All Ye Faithful* by Mack Wilberg, director of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, who contributed four arrangements to the program.

Mitchell went on to introduce two orchestral selections “from the classical canon,” an arrangement of the chorale that appears twice in Johann Sebastian Bach’s Cantata BWV 147 by Leopold Stokowski, long-time conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra and himself an organist, and the breath-taking Dance of the Tumblers from Rimsky-Korsakoff’s *The Snow Maiden*, tossed off at a daring tempo with astonishing clarity.

Mitchell yielded the podium to Cleveland Orchestra director of Choruses Lisa Wong for a hauntingly atmospheric arrangement by B.E. Boykin of the 16th-century English Coventry Carol, and Mack Wilberg’s *One December Bright and Clear*.

Back on the podium, Mitchell gave a nod to another December celebration, the Jewish Festival of Lights, summed up in Jeff Tyzik’s ebullient *Chanukah Suite*, which featured the Orchestra’s gleaming brass section.

Then it was time to bring the audience into the celebration. Mitchell announced that *Away in a Manger* (arranged by Steven Amundson) would be its audition piece, and if things went well, the assembled multitudes would be invited to join in *Joy To the World*. Things did, and Amundson’s arrangement of Handel’s tune set the mood for the composer’s *Hallelujah Chorus* in Mozart’s orchestration, which brought the audience to its feet.

The music drifted toward the popular after intermission with a buoyant Wilberg arrangement of *I Saw Three Ships* and Jeff Tyzik’s *A Christmas Overture*, a set of variations on *Deck the Halls*.

Vocalist Capathia Jenkins made her long-awaited appearance clad in a resplendent white gown during Frank DeVol’s giddy arrangement of *Jingle Bells*, with its jazzy conversations between soloist and the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus.

Randall Craig Fleisher's arrangement of Mark Lowry and Buddy Green's *Mary, Did You Know?* seemed tailor-made for Jenkins' voice and dramatic delivery. Topped off by the Chorus, this turned out to be the barn-burner (stable-burner?) of the evening.

Jenkins bid adieu to the audience with Mariah Carey and Walter Afanasieff's *All I Want for Christmas is You* in an affecting arrangement by Tedd Firth, blowing kisses as she left the stage.

How do you follow such a class act? With an appearance by Saint Nicholas himself, who ho-ho-ho'd his way down the aisle looking untraditionally svelte, to hold a witty Q&A with Brett Mitchell. His departure led to Leroy Anderson's obligatory and delightful *Sleigh Ride*, and to the final piece on the printed program, Wilberg's arrangement of *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*, prefaced by Mitchell's concise (and accurate!) comments about the origin of Mendelssohn's tune.

Not quite finished yet, Mitchell led the performers and audience in Carmen Dragon's lovely and theatrical arrangement of *Silent Night*, and the musical greeting card, *We Wish You a Merry Christmas*.

Meanwhile, out on the roof of Severance Music Center, Santa resumed his appointed rounds. As Clement Clarke Moore wrote,

*He sprang to his sleigh, to his team he gave a whistle,
And away they all flew like the down of a thistle.
But I heard him exclaim, ere he drove out of sight,
HAPPY CHRISTMAS TO ALL AND TO ALL A GOOD NIGHT.*

Photo by [Roger Mastroianni](#)

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