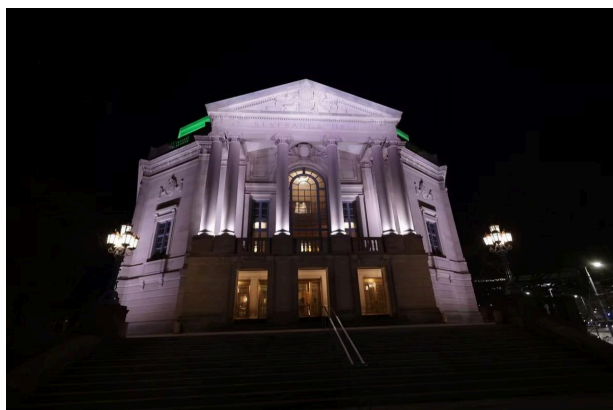


George Benjamin and Cleveland Orchestra transform Severance into a realm of vivid imagery (Feb. 15)

by Kevin McLaughlin | Cleveland Classical
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George Benjamin conducted the Cleveland Orchestra at Severance Music Center on Thursday in a program that included his own *Dream of the Song*, and scores by Dieter Ammann, Oliver Knussen, and Maurice Ravel. David Petkiewicz, [cleveland.com](https://www.cleveland.com) David Petkiewicz, [cleveland.com](https://www.cleveland.com)

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Ballet scores may be the most evocative music. Play Ravel’s *Mother Goose* on a concert stage without dancers or scenery, and you will still imagine the dancing in your mind. On its own, as conducted by George Benjamin and played by The Cleveland Orchestra on Thursday, February 15, it was as full of vivid imagery as if we had spent a night in the theater.

Benjamin, who has described himself as “a composer who conducts,” showed to a nearly full house at Severance Music Center that he

can do both equally well. In a challenging program including his own *Dream of the Song*, and scores by Dieter Ammann, Oliver Knussen, and Maurice Ravel, he also showed the ability to realize each composer’s imagination.

Ammann, who was in attendance, writes highly concentrated music, redolent with as much detail as can be stuffed into any given moment. His work *glut*, which means “glowing” — like a burning ember — is what we may have heard from muted brasses in the opening measures. Like a painting by Hieronymus Bosch, *glut* presents a vast field of orchestral effects that are hard to apprehend, even fractionally, in a single hearing. Some of the more arresting ones included percussive bow-on-string hits, piano and celesta rhythmic juxtapositions, high, penetrating whistling from solo violin, muted wa-wa’s from trumpets and trombones, and bowed glockenspiel producing an eerie whale-song. As the only non-narrative piece on the program, it required the most effort by the listener to take in but was well worth it.

Tim Meade was the protagonist and narrator in George Benjamin's *Dream of Song*, displaying a countertenor voice as velvety and plush as the jacket he wore. The six-movement work sets texts by three 11th-century poets from Granada, Spain — words by two Hebrew poets, sung in English by Mead, and by Gabriel Garcia Lorca, sung in Spanish by the female chorus at the back of the stage.

Benjamin's musical language combines fluidity and transparency — an ideal medium for voices, which he has put to good use in his 2012 opera, *Written on Skin*. In “The Pen,” the opening movement of *Dream of Song*, violence erupts from the four horns but the music becomes gentle again courtesy of the voice, harp, and strings — suggesting both the power and beauty of the written word. A bluesy oboe begins “The Multiple Troubles of Man,” a meditation on human suffering and the heart's ability to withstand it. Throughout the work, Benjamin both contrasts and blends the dark sensuality of the countertenor voice with the female chorus — a sonic play of water and light. The reduced orchestra favored the voice, but also contributed to the work's subtlety of color and mystery.

After intermission came Oliver Knussen's delightful *The Way to Castle Yonder*. Cast in three continuous sections, the music is mined from Knussen's opera collaboration with Maurice Sendak based on his book *Higglety Pigglety Pop!* — a theatrical requiem for Sendak's dog. There's a horse-drawn milk wagon driven by a cat, a pig, a lion, children of course, and even an appearance by Mother Goose — all of whom Knussen's music makes delightfully imaginable.

Speaking of Mother Goose, Ravel's *Ma mère l'Oye* was beautifully played. Benjamin reveled in the lacy textures and under-appreciated details of the score. In his hands the fairy tale came to life. Whirring strings evoked a spinning wheel, the growling contrabassoon gave courage to Beauty's Beast, and distinguished flute and clarinet solos (Joshua Smith and Afendi Yusuf) assured *Sleeping Beauty* of her rest. Trina Struble's exquisite harp cadenza introduced *Laideronnette, Empress of the Pagodas*, which was energized by an agile xylophone (Marc Damoulakis). The Apotheosis finale was glorious.

Kevin McLaughlin recently retired as librarian at the Cleveland Institute of Music. A freelance writer and editor, his weekly podcast on early jazz, “At the Jazz Band Ball,” may be found on a variety of podcast platforms.

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