

Susanna Mälkki leads Cleveland Orchestra in brilliant performances of Bach, Hindemith & more



Finnish conductor Susanna Mälkki returned to Severance Music Center Thursday evening to lead the Cleveland Orchestra in brilliant performances of works by Johann Sebastian Bach and Paul Hindemith. (Photo by Roger Mastroianni) Roger Mastroianni

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CLEVELAND, Ohio — Finnish conductor Susanna Mälkki returned to Severance Music Center Thursday evening to lead The Cleveland Orchestra in brilliant performances of works by two masters of counterpoint — but not in their original formats— and joined guest pianist Isata Kanneh-Mason in a charming piano

concerto by a young piano phenomenon who wasn't yet known as a Schumann when she wrote it.

The evening began with Johann Sebastian Bach's Six-voice *Ricercare*, a grand fugue that the Prussian King Frederick the Great challenged him to improvise on the spot when Bach paid a visit to his son C.P.E. at Potsdam in 1747. Papa Bach begged for more time to craft such a monumental fugue, and so it ended up in his *Musical Offering*, a collection of contrapuntal puzzle pieces based on Frederick's Royal Theme that the Cantor of Leipzig gift-wrapped and sent to Frederick after returning home.

Bach expended a great deal of mental energy in creating that fugue — something akin to building a scale model of the Prussian royal palace with Lego blocks. Enter Anton Webern with a different agenda than merely creating a harmonic masterwork out of six individual melodic lines. His reimagining of the *Ricercare a 6* atomized Bach's material and distributed it among eleven solo instruments and strings according to a technique

Arnold Schoenberg called *Klangfarbenmelodie*, something like the neo-impressionist technique of *pointillism*.

At the opening on Thursday evening, the royal theme was passed effortlessly from trombone to horn to trumpet and onward between individual players and sections. Mälkki built the piece to a grand conclusion with numerous nuances along the way.

At the other end of the evening came Paul Hindemith's *Symphony: Mathis der Maler*, based on the composer's opera about the 15th-century German painter Matthias Grünewald, which he completed in 1935, the same year that Webern conducted the debut of his arrangement of Bach's *Ricercare* in a BBC radio broadcast.

Hindemith found numerous parallels between the life and career of Grünewald and the rise of Nazism, circumstances that delayed the premiere of his opera until 1938, when it was finally produced in Switzerland. Meanwhile, Wilhelm Furtwängler persuaded the composer to repurpose material into a symphony, which he debuted in 1934 in Berlin.

Hindemith and counterpoint? The composer developed his own compositional procedures, some of which create harmonies from the eventual combination of melodic lines that stack up in chords based on the interval of the fourth rather than the third. In the case of this symphony, glorious harmonic climaxes redolent with brass instruments are the destination of individual melodic lines.

The huge work, which the orchestra hasn't performed in many years, was expertly paced by Mälkki, who allowed its lines to breathe while maintaining dramatic tension in all the right places — this *is* opera after all. Second-movement solos by flutist Joshua Smith, oboist Frank Rosenwein, and clarinetist Afendi Yusuf were luscious. During the opening of the third, "The Temptation of St. Anthony, the strings produced a gorgeous *tutti* sound, and the noble chorale that keeps returning crowned the work with an absolute din of brass.

The Schumann who wasn't yet a Schumann was Clara Wieck, who began writing a one-movement concert piece at the age of 13. She expanded it into a Piano Concerto that received its premiere in 1835 — a date that resonates with other works on Thursday's program. The conductor was none other than Felix Mendessohn.

On this occasion, the concerto received a memorable performance by the British pianist Isata Kanneh-Mason, who made the youthful piece — full of technical wizardry that she tossed off with insouciance — sound more mature than it is. Her octaves and well-balanced chords were stunning throughout, and her burnished tone carried easily over the orchestra but never sounded forced.

A highlight was the second movement Romanze — a sublime, extended solo which suddenly morphed into a magical cello-piano duet between Kanneh-Mason and Mark Kosower.

After an enthusiastic ovation and several callbacks, Kanneh-Mason returned to give the audience a final thrill: Chopin's Prelude No. 24. May this be only the first of her many visits to Cleveland.

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