

Finnish guest conductor Dalia Stasevska draws on musical nature in Cleveland Orchestra debut



Mezzo-soprano Josefina Maldonado returned to the Severance stage as Finnish guest conductor Dalia Stasevska made her debut with the Cleveland Orchestra on Thursday. Cleveland Orchestra

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Daniel Hathaway | Cleveland Classical

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Works by two Finnish composers bracketed a major piece by a woman with close ties to Akron on Thursday evening at Severance Music Center. The concert marked the Cleveland Orchestra debut of Finnish guest conductor Dalia Stasevska (currently chief conductor of the Lahti Symphony) as well

as the return to the Severance stage of Texas-born mezzo-soprano Josefina Maldonado (who first appeared here in John Adams’ *El Niño* in November, 2022).

The two women left indelible impressions on the audience as well as on music by Einojuhani Rautavara, Jean Sibelius, and Julia Perry. Stasevska’s much anticipated visit lived up to expectations. She exuded musical passion for whatever score was in front of her and the orchestra responded in kind.

The program also featured a large host of invisible guest artists — the birds of the north — who had pre-recorded their parts for Rautavara’s *Cantus Arcticum*, subtitled “Concerto for Birds and Orchestra.. Set in three movements, the piece captured the essence of the northern wilderness in a beautiful coming together of natural and created sounds.

Shimmering, spooky lines from a pair of flutes introduced “The Bog,” later joined by birdsong with punctuation from the brass. The avian choir introduced “Melancholy” with songs of the Shore Lark underpinned by violins and later by the full string section. Long low notes ended the movement.

A recording of whooper swans captured the beginning of the birds' preparations for migration. A chorale in the horns was passed on to violas and cellos as the third movement ("Swans migrating") grew to a climax, then receded into silence as the swans flew off into the distance.

Rautavara's panoramic music beautifully underscored the complex sounds of nature, and Stasevska and the Orchestra put it across sonorously.

Julia Perry, who grew up in Akron and studied at Tanglewood with Luigi Dallapiccolo and abroad with Nadia Boulanger, wrote her *Stabat Mater* for mezzo-soprano and string orchestra in 1951, setting an anonymous 13th-century poem that finds Mary meditating and weeping at the foot of the cross on which her son is being crucified.

Its ten colorful stanzas provided Perry with plenty of text-painting possibilities, and she rose to the occasion in her 20-minute work. Josefina Maldonado produced a beautiful, round sound that projected well in all registers — which included some deep contralto passages as well as thrilling climaxes in the vocal stratosphere.

Maldonada effortlessly traversed Perry's lyrical lines, while saving her biggest pipes for all the right moments. Stasevska paced the drama adroitly, and concertmaster Amy Lee contributed lush solos.

Thursday's program ended with a remarkable performance of Sibelius' *Second Symphony* in which Stasevska unleashed astonishing levels of physical energy and pushed the Orchestra to extremes of tempo and dynamics. This was Sibelius — musical poet of the icy North — on a grand scale.

She kept the tempo moving ever forward in the suspenseful first movement, and took Sibelius' *Vivacissimo* quite literally in the third (the Orchestra rose to that challenge with headroom to spare). Her transition into the finale was thrilling.

You could quibble with Stasevska's tendency to create too many climactic moments, especially toward the end of the symphony, but getting hit with a sonic tsunami a few times too many can be a memorable experience.

After being granted a moment to breathe, the audience erupted in a volcanic ovation. It's apparently not a habit with Stasevska to give standups to individual players or sections, but surely some were deserved on Thursday, including the flutes who so memorably introduced the birdsong concerto, and principal trumpet Michael Sachs, who crowned the full orchestra sound in so many Sibelius climaxes.

Photo by Aireonna McCall

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