

Conductor shines in Severance Music Center debut with Cleveland Orchestra in Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto (Apr. 26)



The Cleveland Orchestra performed Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto on Friday night at Severance Music Center. (Photo: Roger Mastroianni) Roger Mastroianni

By Kevin McLaughlin | Cleveland Classical

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CLEVELAND, Ohio — Conductor David Afkham made everything look easy in his Severance Music Center debut with The Cleveland Orchestra on Friday evening, April 26. He committed to lead works by Unsuk Chin, Rachmaninoff, and Bartók in March when Lahav Shani asked to be away

for the birth of his first child.

That program would be a heavy lift for any conductor, but the Orchestra responded to Afkham's remarkable assurance and clarity and delivered some of the most exhilarating performances of the season to date.

The curtain-raiser was Unsuk Chin's compelling *subito con forza*, a compact, ingeniously orchestrated work that shows the composer's sly sense of humor and ability to stretch her own limits.

The piece was inspired by the conversation books that helped Beethoven communicate as his hearing diminished. Some of his themes are quoted clearly while others are only suggested. The opening chord of the Coriolan Overture is smashed to smithereens in a sort of percussion section fender-bender, and the rest of the work is devoted to reassembling — or perhaps remembering — the pieces.

The key of c-minor, Beethoven's severest, predominates in the opening and final chords, and there are snatches of the "Emperor" Concerto, the Fifth Symphony, the Leonore

Overtures, and other works that are harder to put your finger on. With his clarity of direction and judicious pacing, Afkham allowed listeners unimpeded access to Chin's splendid and inspired imagination.

Pianist Beatrice Rana, who made her debut with the Orchestra on Friday, gave a surging, deeply moving account of Rachmaninoff's Second Concerto, aided by the wise collaboration of Afkham. It was difficult at times to fathom where so much sound was coming from, but from the very first throbbing chords she sent deep wellsprings of robust tone into the hall.

Not just volume but warmth poured from the piano, a sound that inspired similar timbres from the Orchestra, which supported or superseded her as the music required. The solo wind playing from hornist Nathan Silberschlag, flutist Joshua Smith, and clarinetist Afendi Yusuf was exquisite.

Rana was capable of the subtlest birdlike stirrings, but she could also serve up passion and muscularity, as in the churning chords in the outer movements or the driving rhythms of the finale. Her Adagio unfolded deliberately, like a quiet lullaby.

After a long, thunderous ovation, Rana politely returned to the stage and without announcement, delivered a touching account of Scriabin's Etude in C-sharp minor, Op. 42, No. 5.

Bartok's Concerto for Orchestra is the composer's most popular orchestral work, and with his interpretation, Afkham showed us why. In this performance every section exhibited their own virtuosic capabilities, as well as their sensitive accompanying skills. All of the solos were transparent, and surrounding textures were well balanced.

In the second movement, all pairs of instruments — bassoons, oboes, trumpets, etc. — relished Bartok's playfulness, including comical rubatos (flutes and clarinets) in the reprises. The strings played their muted scales with fluidity and ease.

In the Elegia, the violins maximized a sense of anguish and intensity, playing on the G string. The fourth movement, Interrupted Intermezzo, was delightfully boisterous. Afkham held the perpetual motion in check, and carefully controlled the tempo and meter changes of the fugal section. The brass may have unmoored the Severance Music Center from its foundations at the climax — but in a collegial spirit.

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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