

Summers at Severance makes triumphant return (July 11)

by Stephanie Manning



In between their already-packed schedule at Blossom Music Center, the musicians of The Cleveland Orchestra appeared at their usual venue — Severance Music Center — for an exciting offering on July 11. Returning after a five-year absence, the Summers at Severance series kicked off with a high-quality evening of Mandel Concert Hall debuts.

Conductor Oksana Lyniv, joining the Orchestra for the first time, brought a graceful precision and strong sense of tempo to the podium. The synergy between conductor and orchestra was evident from the opening piece, Leoš Janáček's Suite from *The Cunning Little Vixen*, with both parties working together to ensure smooth tapers and clean beats of silence. Janáček's work uses its non-string instruments sparingly, which also complemented Lyniv's light touch — the composer often saves the woodwinds for moments when they are sure to be heard, from the sparkles of piccolo to the low rumbles of contrabassoon.

Not only was the conductor making her Cleveland debut, but so was Ukrainian composer Borys Liatoshynsky's *Grazhyna*. The lyrical work fit in quite well with the program, echoing the brooding strings of the Janáček while also giving the brass and percussion more to do. Grandiose timpani and fanfares from muted French horns marked the dramatic peak before a return to the opening material and its bittersweet English horn solo.

While listeners may have been unfamiliar with Liatoshynsky's work, they would have been much more likely to recognize the evening's concerto, Sergei Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. Pianist Inon Barnatan seamlessly joined the universe of conductor and orchestra, sticking to Lyniv's measured tempo throughout his endless streams of notes and easily projecting his melodic lines to the back of the concert hall.

The pianist and orchestra coordinated for tasteful rubatos, particularly during Variation 18 and its famously beautiful melody. Barnatan's heartrending cadenza was simply

gorgeous, and Lyniv wisely brought in the string section afterwards at a gentler volume, making the eventual opening up of the fully fleshed out melody all the more sweet. The pianist then flexed his technical chops in the triumphant finale, capping off a truly impeccable performance from everyone onstage.



Each of the four pieces lasted about 20 minutes, fleshing out their different musical worlds without overstaying their welcome. While most were sweet and lyrical, Igor Stravinsky’s Suite from *The Firebird* was perhaps the odd one out — but movements like the “Infernal Dance of King Kashchei” provided the perfect chance to let out some of the pent-up energy that had been collecting all evening.

Of course, the Stravinsky provided plenty of slower moments, including the eerie, quiet opening that the acoustic prevented from getting lost. Lyniv would often set down her baton to carefully craft the softest moments. Although the ensemble of the “Berceuse” felt slightly unsteady at times, with the tempo in danger of dragging, the final movement dispelled any shakiness, the culmination of energy rounding things out with a satisfying thrill.

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