

Cleveland Orchestra weathers the storm with Tchaikovsky's Fifth at Blossom (Aug. 17)



The Cleveland Orchestra The Lord of the Rings The Two Towers Ludwig Wicki, conductor Blossom Festival Chorus Cleveland Orchestra Children's Chorus
Photo by Roger Mastroianni Roger Mastroianni

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CUYAHOGA FALLS, Ohio — The Cleveland Orchestra hasn't had much luck with the weather lately.

Last week's performance with John Legend started late, got put on pause, and was eventually canceled after strong storms moved

over Blossom Music Center. August 17 presented another uncertain forecast, but the Orchestra was determined to forge ahead if possible. And this time, they weathered the storm.

The turbulent weather — which delayed the concert by 30 minutes — made the marquee work feel especially fitting for the occasion. Written during a tempestuous period in Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's life, his Symphony No. 5 explores the composer's inner turmoil and his struggles against the forces of Fate.

The Orchestra have polished the work beautifully for their European tour later this month. Under the baton of music director Franz Welser-Möst, the ensemble skillfully unleashed their full dynamic range — the second movement in particular held everything from rousing brass fanfares to a gorgeously smooth solo from principal horn Nathaniel Silberschlag and a delicate clarinet ending.

Only a hint of push-and-pull appeared between conductor and orchestra in the first movement, which seemed slightly hurried at points, though never uncontrolled. But the third-movement waltz felt very grounded, and the finale found the ensemble fully in their groove, the rousing closing section triumphing over storms both literal and figurative.

The scheduled opening work, Allison Loggins-Hull's *Can You See?*, likely would have paired well with both the moodiness and hopefulness of the Tchaikovsky. Taking its title from the words of "The Star-Spangled Banner," the piece muses on the idea of patriotism and its layers of meaning. Disappointingly, because of the late start to the performance, the Orchestra opted not to play it.

Instead, once the downpour had stopped and the setting sun reappeared, the musicians wasted no time launching into Robert Schumann's Piano Concerto. At the keyboard was Víkingur Ólafsson, who will join the group for the same piece on some of their European performances.

When you think of Ólafsson, you might also think of Johann Sebastian Bach. After all, the Icelandic pianist just dedicated an entire year to performing Bach's Goldberg Variations — yes, the entire set — all around the world. But now that Ólafsson's back to a more typical concerto schedule, it's easy to remember how Schumann fits his style like a glove.

His hands never straying far from the keys, the pianist's light touch complemented the tranquility of Schumann's concerto — a work that is far from ostentatious, yet still virtuosic. Ólafsson's fluidity in both movement and phrasing drew the listener in. On the sides of the pavilion, intrepid concertgoers still streaming in after the gates opened late gathered close to listen, and a hush would fall over everyone whenever the pianist got extremely quiet.

The Orchestra was especially sensitive to the nuances of Ólafsson's playing, keeping things calm and ensuring even the biggest dynamic swells only peaked at a comfortable mid-range. Individuals also had their moments to shine, like in the gentle oboe solos sprinkled throughout the first movement.

The audience responded enthusiastically, calling Ólafsson back to the stage three times in hopes of an encore. This was not to be, likely due to time constraints. But he'll be back in Cleveland soon enough, performing a recital with Yuja Wang in February — so maybe next time.

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