

Daniel Harding leads Cleveland Orchestra in wide-ranging and satisfying symphonic showcase (Oct. 3)



Guest conductor Daniel Harding led the Cleveland Orchestra in a program Oct. 4 that showcased symphonic works from the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, highlighting the evolution of the symphony over 300 years. The program included works by Franz Joseph Haydn, Robert Schumann and George Walker. Yevhen Gulenko for the Cleveland Orchestra, Used with Permission

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CLEVELAND, Ohio — Given that symphonies have been a staple in the orchestral repertoire for 300 years, it would be impossible to cover their entire history in one evening. Even so, the three works on The Cleveland Orchestra’s October 4 program gave listeners a taste of the styles of composers writing in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries.

Fittingly, the evening opened with music by Franz Joseph Haydn, the “Father of the Symphony.” With 106 symphonies to choose from, the Orchestra selected No. 92, nicknamed “Oxford,” even though it was commissioned by the comte d’Ogny for performance in Paris in 1789. Guest conductor Daniel Harding, who happened to be born and raised in Oxford, led the performance with precision and without unnecessary dramatics.

That approach worked quite well for this refined and elegant piece for chamber orchestra, and the result was light and buoyant. Harding gave equal attention to what Haydn does and doesn’t say, treating its many delicate pauses with care. Lovely solos from flute, oboe, and bassoon abounded before the energy ramped up in the final movement.

Harding had a clear vision for each phrase, which he telegraphed in every sweep of his arm and lowering of his hands. He resisted micromanaging, keeping himself relaxed and trusting in the musicians’ innate sense of ensemble. The buoyancy of the Haydn also

carried through into Robert Schumann's *Symphony No. 2*, and conductor and players kept things brisk even as the music sped up in the fiendish Scherzo.

The Schumann found itself in the middle, both as the program's 19th century piece and size-wise, with a fuller instrumentation. Filled with rhythmic repetition and gently swaying chromatic lines, the work, taken as a whole, doesn't elicit many strong feelings.

Still, its octave jumps were regal, and its finale celebratory. If this symphony is a struggle between light and dark, as the program notes suggest, then the triumphant last movement certainly hands the victory to the light side.

Between Haydn and Schumann came the gem of the program, George Walker's *Sinfonia No. 2*. Although the ensemble is no stranger to Walker's work, having released an album of his music in 2022, this particular piece received its Cleveland Orchestra premiere on Thursday evening.

Composed in 1990, Walker's dense, brooding and angular symphony represented a huge leap forward in the program's timeline, but The Cleveland Orchestra musicians transitioned easily, reveling in its dissonance and swelling to sharp dramatic peaks.

The audience collectively held its breath in the second movement, which featured an extended unaccompanied flute solo by Saeran St. Christopher, who played with a sweet tone and gentle vibrato. Her two well-deserved solo bows were greeted with warm applause from the audience as well as from her smiling colleagues.

Stephanie Manning trained as a bassoonist before becoming a correspondent for ClevelandClassical.com. As a freelancer, her writing has also appeared in The Montreal Gazette, CBC Montreal, and Early Music America

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