

Discovering the magic of water-inspired music with Tan Dun and the Cleveland Orchestra (Oct. 31)

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The Cleveland Orchestra and solo percussionist Marc Damoulakis perform Thursday, Oct. 31, 2024, under the baton of guest conductor Tan Dun. Roger Mastroianni

By Stephanie Manning

CLEVELAND, Ohio — The gusty winds that buffeted Severance Music Center on Halloween night seemed an apt complement for music about the elements. Inside, though, the focus was on a different force of nature: water, both literal and figurative.

On the podium was composer-conductor Tan Dun,

making his Cleveland Orchestra debut in a program that will be repeated on Saturday, November 2. With the composer himself present, it was only fitting that the ensemble should give the Cleveland premiere of two of his pieces: the *Water Concerto* and *Concerto for Orchestra*.

Plenty of composers have already written music about water — like Benjamin Britten, whose *Four Sea Interludes from Peter Grimes* appeared in the second half of the evening. The third movement, “Moonlight,” stood out for its elegant phrasing, suggesting calm waters on a clear night. That peace was then briskly swept away by the ensuing “Storm,” which the orchestra approached with the requisite ferocity, the all-consuming turmoil frothing the rough seas.

Dun’s *Water Concerto* is different. This isn’t water as we’re used to imagining it — this piece “for water percussion and orchestra” invites both players and listeners to interact with it in new ways.

Blue lighting suffused the hall as principal percussionist Marc Damoulakis made his entrance from the back of the house, twirling and bowing a curious lantern-like

instrument called a waterphone. At the front of the stage were two large bowls filled with water along with a variety of implements.

Percussion concertos can tap into childlike imagination and creativity — the thrill of discovering all the new sounds a percussionist can make. Dun's piece offers that in spades. Every new instrument Damoulakis introduced to the water — a small gong, a Slinky phone, a set of Agogo bells — inspired a sense of wonder. What's he going to do with that? The answer: almost anything, and expertly done. In the percussionist's hands, even the amplified sound of running water became captivating.

Dun was all smiles all evening, including during Damoulakis' cadenzas. He also radiated enthusiasm for his *Concerto for Orchestra*, telling the audience how he was inspired by the journeys of Marco Polo. But in comparison to the *Water Concerto*, this composition falls a little flat, relying too heavily on the shock value of orchestral exclamations at maximum volume.

Still, the musicians never flagged during the 35-minute work, each gesture a coiled spring of energy released by orchestra and conductor alike. And the third movement "Raga of Desert" featured confident solos from all four woodwind principals.

Igor Stravinsky's *Fireworks*, the brief program opener, kicked the evening off with the Orchestra's characteristic precision, sprinkled with timpani and cymbal crashes that had the conductor bouncing gleefully.

And although the *Water Concerto* happened before intermission, that was the piece that really got the last word. By the end, as Damoulakis lifted a sieve into the air — a waterfall rushing down — the audience was eager to leap to their feet in pure joy.

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