

Cleveland Orchestra delights Halloween and Christmas fans alike with early holiday concert (Nov. 1)



The Cleveland Orchestra performed a single, sold-out "The Nightmare Before Christmas" concert on Friday night at Severance Music Center. Roger Mastroianni

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By Peter Feher

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- This year, the Cleveland Orchestra has virtually every store, shopping mall, and local radio station beat in being the first to break out the Christmas music.

The day after Halloween may be too early for most Ohioans to start getting into the holiday spirit, but it's the perfect time for Jack Skellington and the charmingly creepy

stop-motion cast of the 1993 animated film "The Nightmare Before Christmas."

Die-hard fans have often debated during which season the movie should be shown – Halloween or Christmas? You could say the Cleveland Orchestra came up with something of a clever compromise, presenting "Nightmare" live in concert along with the airing of the movie on Friday, Nov. 1 at Severance Music Center. It was a single sold-out performance.

Still, the message of this film — about rediscovering oneself and, in the process, recovering the meaning of a certain holiday — is as Christmassy as it gets.

Never mind the spooky setting and Halloween characters, which initially led Disney to distance itself from the project over fears that younger children would be scared. The movie's creative team — beginning with Tim Burton, who dreamed up the concept but was largely uninvolved in the eventual production — wanted to tell a heartwarming holiday tale.

Jack's scheme to steal Christmas is as unlikely as the Grinch's (and overall better intentioned), and there's even a red-nosed reindeer who saves the day (well, make it the ghost of a dog with a glowing jack-o'-lantern nose).

The film's visuals are surrealist but shorn of much of their sinister connotation. The spiral hill that unfurls in one of the movie's most beautiful sequences could be straight out of a painting by Salvador Dalí. Jack, in his stiff, spindly grace, might have been sculpted by Alberto Giacometti. Even the story's big villain, Oogie Boogie, holed up in an underground lair kitted out as a gambling den, is ultimately as ineffectual as the Queen of Hearts from "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland."

The music by composer Danny Elfman may seem more macabre than merry, with Jack and the denizens of Halloween Town singing variously of "spider legs," "Sandy Claws," and Christmastime "buzzing in my skull." Yet for every sordid turn the score takes, there's a countervailing musical current. The "Dies irae" (Day of wrath) from the Latin Mass for the dead resounds throughout the film, but so does "Jingle Bells."

The symphonic writing was where the Cleveland Orchestra excelled, whether in the dark, dreary world of double reeds and low brass or the holiday wonderland of celesta and glockenspiel. Guest conductor Lawrence Loh kept expert pace with the rapid changes and action on screen.

Staying perfectly in sync with pre-recorded vocals is the most punishing part of playing along with a movie musical like this. Elfman performed all of Jack's songs for the film, and his delivery is idiosyncratic and theatrically over-the-top — resulting in a click track that would keep any orchestra on its toes. And that's to say nothing of the ensemble numbers, where a dozen different voices each sing with slightly differing precision.

But story, score, and setting came together in the end, with Christmas saved, the characters celebrating in song, and Halloween Town blanketed in a dreamlike layer of snow.

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