

Cleveland Orchestra delivers a stirring night of Shostakovich, Mozart and Chopin with Heras-Casado and Ax



Guest conductor Pablo Heras-Casado led the Cleveland Orchestra in Shostakovich's Symphony No. 10 and Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 20 on Thursday at Severance Music Center. Guest star Emanuel Ax's piano artistry and a Chopin encore enriched the concert's emotional depth. Yevhen Gulenko.

By Peter Feher | ClevelandClassical

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CLEVELAND, Ohio — It's fitting that conductor Pablo Heras-Casado should be leading The Cleveland Orchestra this week in Dmitri Shostakovich's Symphony No. 10 — the work of a mid-career composer who was looking to make a major statement.

A decade ago, Heras-Casado was regularly touted as a possible candidate

for a music directorship at a top U.S. orchestra. Although some of the heat has died down since — the 47-year-old Spaniard is currently between posts and sticking to guest-conducting gigs — he started to get the furnace roaring again at Severance Music Center on Thursday, Dec. 5.

His scorching performance of Shostakovich was timely. While Franz Welser-Möst isn't retiring until 2027, the Mandel Concert Hall podium has seen about a dozen visitors this fall, some subbing last-minute while he recovers from medical treatment. Although Heras-Casado was booked well in advance, his program pairing Shostakovich and Mozart has a certain gravitas that might signal serious intentions.

There's nothing to hide behind in Shostakovich's Symphony No. 10, though a pair of coded messages in the score might initially suggest otherwise. Two motifs — one with pitches spelling out the composer's initials, another coding the first name of a student and love interest — are coupled in the piece's third movement. What other meanings might be buried in the music?

These ciphers aren't the seeds of some grand conspiracy but rather the simple themes that a master composer spins out into an hourlong symphony. If Shostakovich was secretive about anything it was his artistic ambitions.

He did keep the Tenth Symphony under wraps until shortly before its premiere in 1953, the beginning of the post-Stalinist thaw in the Soviet Union.

Heras-Casado gave his instrumentalists a remarkable degree of freedom while still reining in the overall structure. Among the standout soloists on Thursday, clarinetist Afendi Yusuf, French hornist Nathaniel Silberschlag, and piccolo player Mary Kay Fink offered particularly spellbinding moments.

The long first movement, which can sometimes drag, here was never too slow, and the piece's many manic episodes stayed solidly under control, perhaps too much so when it came to the savage second movement scherzo.

Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 20, which opened the concert, could also have benefited from a little more drama. Veteran pianist Emanuel Ax played with the full, rounded tone for which he's known, and the Orchestra followed suit, smoothing over some of the Storm and Stress of Mozart's work, one of only two piano concertos the composer set in a minor key.

The passion that started to build in the first-movement cadenza broke out in full by the third-movement finale, as if the musical splendor could no longer be contained.

Ax had still more to share in his encore — Frédéric Chopin's dreamy, introspective Nocturne in C-sharp Minor, Op. 27, No. 1 — a private world made public in a touching performance.

The program will be repeated at 7:30 p.m. Friday and 8 p.m. Saturday at Mandel Concert Hall at Severance Music Center, 11001 Euclid Ave, Cleveland. Tickets, starting at \$35, are available at clevelandorchestra.com.

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