

Cleveland Orchestra's holiday concerts return with plenty of festive cheer



The Cleveland Orchestra will fill Severance Music Center with the sounds of the season during a series of 12 holiday concerts. (Photo credit: Roger Mastroianni/The Cleveland Orchestra) Roger Mastroianni/The Cleveland Orchestra Mastroianni

By Stephanie Manning

This article was originally published on Cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio — If the twinkling lights, leafy green garlands and festive poinsettias didn't already clue you in, the holidays have arrived at Severance Music Center. 'Tis the season for annual traditions — including The [Cleveland Orchestra's holiday concerts](#), which began on Wednesday evening.

Running through December 22, the programs feature plenty of seasonal classics plus some potential new favorites. The first performance proved that this mix is a delightful recipe for festive cheer.

“Look at you all, out on a school night!” conductor Sarah Hicks proclaimed joyfully from the podium. Just as many concertgoers donned red outfits to get into the spirit, Mandel Concert Hall was also decked out with decorations and stage lighting effects.

For the sprightly “Mother Ginger” from Tchaikovsky’s “The Nutcracker,” the hall was bathed in an icy blue that swiftly changed to a warm orange for the Russian dance “Trepak.” These two selections were some of the orchestra’s solo contributions to the evening, which also included brisk renditions of Leroy Anderson’s ever-popular “Sleigh Ride” and Angela Morley’s light and airy “Snow Ride.”

“Joyful Echoes,” a nostalgic medley arranged by Robert Elhal, included “Mele Kalikimaka” — ukulele and all — as a nod to Hicks’ Hawaiian childhood. And Flory Jagoda’s Ocho “Kandelikas,” a Hanukkah tune jam-packed with Argentine tango rhythms, featured gleeful glissandos from the trumpets and trombones.

“Has anyone heard that one before?” Hicks asked the audience, who murmured in the negative. “Fantastic! Then I’ve done my job.”

Another unfamiliar selection was Via Olatunji and Wendell Whalum’s “Betelehemu,” featuring The Cleveland Orchestra Chorus and members of the Blossom Festival Chorus. Director Lisa Wong led her singers and the percussionists in the upbeat Nigerian piece.

Wong also conducted John Rutter’s “All the Stars Looked Down,” which highlighted the choruses’ sensitive dynamics, as did John Williams and Leslie Bricusse’s “Somewhere in My Memory” from “Home Alone.” Although the latter had a few tenuous ensemble moments, instrumentalists and singers came together perfectly in John Francis Wade’s “O Come, All Ye Faithful.”

Guest vocalist Jimmie Herrod’s four featured songs seemed all too brief given his distinctive, charismatic voice and whose range lies comfortably higher than you might expect. A relaxed, smiling presence onstage, he added his own flair to classic selections like “Winter Wonderland” and “The Christmas Waltz” without overcomplicating them.

The only distraction in Herrod’s performance was his overly sensitive microphone. Regardless, “My Grown-Up Christmas List” was nicely sentimental, and the Orchestra followed his every move through the humorous tempo changes in James Lord Pierpont’s “Jingle Bells.”

Other traditions rounded out the evening, including “Angels We Have Heard On High,” an audience sing-along of “Joy to the World,” and Handel’s “Hallelujah” chorus from “Messiah.” And of course, Santa Claus himself made it to the party, answering audience questions read out by Hicks in a bit of delightful stand-up comedy.

Santa also had some advice for the conductor: she might need some long-sleeved outfits for the Cleveland winter. And given the inch of fluffy snow that greeted us as we made our way outside, Santa was absolutely right.

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.

The Cleveland Orchestra’s holiday concerts run through Dec. 22 at Severance Music Center, 11001 Euclid Ave., Cleveland. Tickets, \$49-\$140, are available at clevelandorchestra.com.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com December 16, 2024.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)