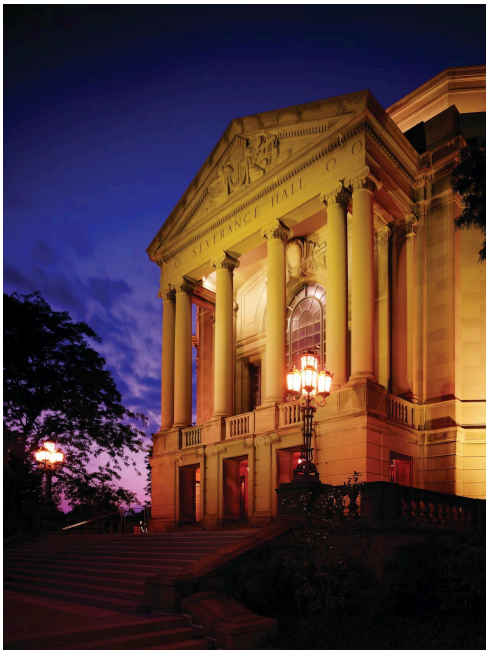


The Cleveland Orchestra delights audiences with the heartwarming *Muppet Christmas Carol*

by Stephanie Manning



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CLEVELAND, Ohio — With a whole week to go, December 18 wasn't quite "One More Sleep 'til Christmas." But for those at Severance Music Center on Wednesday, it was close enough.

That heartfelt ballad about Christmas Eve sung by Kermit the Frog is just one of many gems from *The Muppet Christmas Carol* — the surprisingly faithful movie retelling of Charles Dickens' tale that features Michael Caine, the cast of the Muppets, and a healthy dose of holiday cheer. Add to that list The Cleveland Orchestra, who played Miles Goodman's score live under the direction of Sarah Hicks.

The beloved Disney holiday classic, released in 1992, drew a sold-out crowd. The Orchestra's performance of Paul Williams' songs — which many in the audience likely knew by heart — blended almost indistinguishably with the film.

Timing a musical poses a bigger challenge than other live-to-picture performances, as the vocals are set and the live performers must nimbly keep up. In earlier songs like "Scrooge" and "One More Sleep 'til Christmas," the Orchestra seemed eager to pull on the tempo a bit, although that was smoothed out for "Marley and Marley" and beyond.

The movie's narration by Gonzo (as Charles Dickens) and Rizzo the Rat (as himself) worked even better in front of a live crowd, drawing plenty of laughter when the pair broke the fourth wall in humorous ways. "Should we be worried about the kids in the audience?" Rizzo asks after Scrooge's spooky encounter with the ghosts of his business partners. "Nah, it's all right. This is culture," Gonzo replies.

It's easy to get immersed in the story of Scrooge — played brilliantly by Michael Caine, who delivers lines like “This is Fozziewig’s old rubber chicken factory!” with a Shakespearean gravitas. But plenty of moments drew attention to the musicians as well.

The Overture delivered a cheerful piccolo and tuba duet, while later on, the low brass, timpani, and chimes soberly announced the arrival of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. And during Scrooge’s trip to the past — at that rubber chicken factory — some boisterous hits from the drum set garnered a round of applause.

Heartfelt and even tearjerking moments balance the film’s humor. Scrooge’s icy heart begins to thaw as the Ghost of Christmas Present sings the cheery “It Feels Like Christmas” before introducing young Tiny Tim, who leads the Cratchit family in the earnest “Bless Us All.”

A delightful surprise was the inclusion of “When Love is Gone,” a tender number by Scrooge’s past love Belle that was cut from the original theatrical release. The musicians delivered a touching performance that gently segued into intermission.

Hearing “When Love Is Gone” makes the finale, “When Love Is Found,” all the sweeter, as the two songs use most of the same melody. Tiny Tim does not die, Scrooge embraces the joy of Christmas, and everyone gets their happy ending. Let us follow the sage advice of the Ghost of Christmas Present, and keep this merry spirit in our hearts all year round.

Photo by Roger Mastroianni

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