

## Thomas Adès leads Cleveland Orchestra in colorful concert of Sibelius, Saariaho, Ives & more (Feb. 20)



Thomas Adès conducts the Cleveland Orchestra and The Cleveland Orchestra Chorus at Mandel Concert Hall at Severance Music Center on Feb. 20, 2025. Roger Mastroianni

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CLEVELAND, Ohio — Thomas Adès is obsessed with sound color, as he vividly demonstrated with the assistance of the unflappable Cleveland Orchestra and Chorus in his guest appearance as curator, composer, and conductor at Severance Music Center on Thursday evening, February 20.

Works by Jan Sibelius, Kaija Saariaho, Charles Ives and Adès himself visited a vast spectrum of choral and orchestral hues that can be heard by the ear. Some of them use those colors to make poignant social commentary at the same time.

Color is represented impressionistically in the inexorable ebbing and flowing of the sea in Sibelius' *The Oceanides* and Saariaho's *Otra Mar*, and through musical collisions in Charles Ives' *Orchestral Set No. 2*. And in the third, recently added movement of Adès's *America: the Prophecy*, in ominous musical proclamations.

The evening began atmospherically with *The Oceanides*' rumbling waves, and sunny, giggling birdcalls played charmingly by the flutes. Sibelius also suggests the mysterious unpredictability and ever-changing personality of the sea.

Charles Ives' 20-minute, three movement *Orchestral Set No. 2* is scored with maximum orchestral color in mind, including organ, synthesizers, accordion, and off-stage orchestra and chorus.

It begins darkly in the basses, cellos, and percussion in “An elegy to Our Fore Fathers,” then a chorale emerges in the violins above a dirge in the low strings.

“The Rockstrewn Hills Join in the People’s Outdoor Meeting” commences with weird, honky-tonky dance music that morphs into a grand parade, then fades away.

“From Hanover Square North, at the End of a Tragic Day, the Voice of the People Again Arose” is an Ivesian recreation of the public reaction to the sinking of The Lusitania by a German submarine. The noisy crowd collides with an offstage chorus singing a Te Deum, then suddenly In the Sweet Bye and Bye emerges from the chaos.

The works on the second half of the concert receiving their Cleveland premieres on Thursday originally debuted on the same New York Philharmonic program on November 11, 1999 conducted by Kurt Masur.

Saariaho’s *Oltra Mar (Across the Sea)*, *Seven Preludes for the New Millennium*, is an object lesson in creating colors and manipulating them to maximum sonic effect.

Long, exaggerated lines created an otherworldly ambiance and transitioned into huge, dramatic statements. Floating, spinning, and swirling, they all drifted away with the words “The man has passed, the shadow has disappeared, the prisoner is free,” a reference to the death of composer Gérard Grisey.

The final work, Thomas Adès’s own *America: A Prophecy*, originally conceived with optional chorus, was reworked for its recommissioning and its Cleveland and U.S. debut with a stupendous, third movement choral finale.

Low winds playing unison rhythmic lines set up the enthralling mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke’s haunting vocal lines in “O my nation prepare.” This and the second movement, “Burn, burn, burn,” set words from the Mayan books of Ch’ílán Balam lauding the colonizers whose destructive acts are lamented in the third (“In every birth a death”) as part of the eternal cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

The stentorian work made astonishing use of the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus, crowned with demonic brass fanfares and a pair of piccolos — a flood of color at the culmination of an amazing concert in which The Cleveland Orchestra and Chorus outdid themselves.

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