

Cleveland Orchestra marks Ravel's 150th birthday with masterful performance (Mar. 6)



Music director Franz Welser-Möst leads a refined tribute to the French composer, featuring pianist Seong-Jin Cho. Devon Keller, special to Cleveland.com

By Peter Feher | ClevelandClassical

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CLEVELAND, Ohio — When Maurice Ravel visited Northeast Ohio in 1928, not everything went according to plan. The French composer had a reputation for being far more brilliant on paper than in person. Nikolai Sokoloff, then music director of The Cleveland Orchestra, would recount afterward how Ravel came late to rehearsal, conducted his pieces

clumsily, and left listeners somewhat confused.

So, it's entirely fitting that this weekend's concerts at Severance Music Center, which mark the 150th anniversary of the composer's birth, should be entrusted to more polished hands.

Music director Franz Welser-Möst was back on the podium in Mandel Concert Hall on Thursday, March 6, presiding over a masterful performance that made a virtue of restraint. Tasteful extravagance may be more typical of Ravel's style, but The Cleveland Orchestra has a way with refinement. And so does Korean pianist Seong-Jin Cho, the evening's soloist, who gave a sensitive, at times subdued account of the composer's Concerto in G Major.

Ravel didn't intend for this piece to require a virtuoso's touch. Toward the end of his career, he set out to write a concerto that he could play himself, but as in many of his works, his ambitions as a composer overtook his skills as a pianist. His musical genius lay in being able to synthesize everything he heard — the G-Major Concerto sounds like

an effortless mix of Mozart and jazz and yet hardly derivative of either. Executing this artistic vision as a performer is quite another matter, however.

Cho, who shot to fame after winning the 2015 International Chopin Piano Competition, has dazzling technique to spare, and his performance started off with a slap and concluded with a bang. A good dose of lyrical introspection came in between. Cho has devoted himself to Ravel this season, having made a project of recording the composer's complete solo piano music, and he duly communicated this passion through his poetic consideration of every single note and phrase.

The concerto's overall arc could have benefited from a bit more ease and nonchalance, but isolated moments that Cho crafted were exquisite. The subtleties in his playing were most evident in his solos, from how he began the second movement with such delicacy to how he dispatched the breeziest of encores, Ravel's "À la manière de Borodine."

"Rapsodie espagnole" rounded out the all-Ravel first half, with Welser-Möst coaxing a beautifully transparent sound from the Orchestra as he set the dance rhythms of the piece spinning. Amid the whirl of the final movement, "Feria," English hornist Robert Walters broke out in a stirring, soulful melody, one of several impassioned solos he would deliver over the course of the evening.

The tall task of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony awaited everyone after intermission. Welser-Möst and the Orchestra tapped into a different, darker sensibility straight from the outset, the brass proclaiming the ominous opening fanfare with a boldness that only grew as the first movement progressed. The emotion carried over into the Andantino, whose melancholy song was introduced flawlessly by oboist Frank Rosenwein. Even as the mood lightened in the Scherzo and Finale, a deep undercurrent of feeling was still present, all the more moving for its precision and restraint.

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