

The Cleveland Orchestra brings the “Wild” inside (Mar. 2)

by Kate MacKenzie



On Sunday, March 2, animal print was à la mode at Severance Music Center, as concertgoers donned masks of leopards, crocodiles, and other creatures for Dan Brown’s *Wild Symphony*. The program was presented as part of The Cleveland Orchestra Family Concert Series.

Conductor Daniel Reith led the ensemble, but the star of the stage was *Wild Symphony*’s author and composer.

Although best known for his novel *The DaVinci Code*, Brown recently made his debut in the genre of juvenile fiction. A life-long lover of classical music, Brown was inspired by works like *Peter and the Wolf* and *The Carnival of the Animals* to write his own introduction to the orchestra. A marshland walk prompted the first composition: a poem and short piece modeled after the chorus of frogs he’d heard. Over the years, the project expanded to more than twenty poems and brief orchestral works representing different animals. *Wild Symphony* was published as a picture book in 2020, along with an app designed to play each movement as the pages are turned.

Even in the grand Mandel Concert Hall, Sunday’s live performance of the work had an intimate feeling. Seated cross-legged in an armchair onstage, Dan Brown himself read the witty and charming rhyming verses that introduced each new movement. Above, a large screen displayed Susan Batori’s illustrations for those who had not brought their own copies to follow along.

The Orchestra’s Family Concerts are aimed towards those seven and older, but kids of all ages filled the hall, wriggling in their seats and speaking to their adults in stage whispers as the lights dimmed. The introductions of speaker, narrator, and conductor turned some children’s heads, but nearly all snapped to attention at the first notes of the energetic overture “Maestro Mouse.”

Nineteen more animals were introduced during the hour-long event. Each of Brown's compositions were vibrant, cleverly orchestrated, and executed with energy and precision. Melodies were pleasant, but unmemorable — it is the creative playing with rhythm and timbre that drives the music.



The percussion section was employed to particular effect. Upward timpani slides created the perfect “boiiiing” for the “Bouncing Kangaroo,” while bowed vibraphone and crotales suggested the shimmering waterscape of “The Ray.” Other features included marimba for skittering beetles, guiro for chirping frogs, and wood blocks for clip-clopping horses. For many of the movements, Brown was able to create a distinct sonic environment merely by

varying the most prominent percussion instrument.

Concertmaster solos are also used as a storytelling device. In “Eager Elephant,” Liyuan Xie played the part of a calf learning to trumpet, squeakily replying in a dialogue with the orchestra's powerful theme. Leaning into the rare request to play out of tune, Xie performed his role with enthusiasm, his unmelodious attempts earning him laughs from all ages.

Most movements are harmonically traditional, but not all. Brown dabbles in polytonality for the “Anxious Ostrich,” whose nervousness builds to a blaring, dissonant climax before shifting to a tranquil contrasting theme — the bird presumably having buried its head in the sand.

Brown's hope for *Wild Symphony* is that, “in an age of headphones and earbuds, families will choose to enjoy the music together.” Throughout the performance, children bobbed, danced and clapped along. Some mimicked the gestures of the conductor or a favorite instrument. Afterwards, families discussed their favorite movements as they meandered their way outside. Thanks to Dan Brown and The Cleveland Orchestra, classical music might just have made a few new fans on Sunday.

Photo by Scott Esterly

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