

Cleveland Orchestra delivers powerful performances of Beethoven, Janáček (Mar. 13)



Franz Welser-Möst conducts the Cleveland Orchestra at Severance Music Center. Roger Mastroianni

By Stephanie Manning

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CLEVELAND, Ohio — This week’s Cleveland Orchestra programs were to have featured soprano Asmik Grigorian in Richard Strauss’s *Four Last Songs*. But when Grigorian withdrew last week for personal reasons, the focus changed to works by Beethoven while keeping intact the original theme of darkness into light.

On Thursday, March 13, music director Franz Welser-Möst wasted no time arriving at what would usually be a concert’s main event. The very first notes that rang out in Severance Music Center formed the iconic four-note motif known around the world — the opening of Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony*.

Yes, one of the most famous classical music pieces ever written opened the program instead of closing it. It’s an unconventional programming choice — but after all, Beethoven’s *Fifth* is a piece that needs little introduction. At least not today.

The *Symphony*’s premiere on December 22, 1808, was part of a frigid four-hour affair in which audience members heard piece after piece while shivering in Vienna’s Theater an der Wien. Thankfully, on this mild March evening in Cleveland, the experience of hearing the *Fifth* felt much more comfortable.

From the beginning, Welser-Möst kept the action moving briskly, intensified by powerful unisons from the full string section. But the smaller instrument groups had an

equally large impact. Throughout, the crisp horn calls could be heard clearly. Principal oboe Frank Rosenwein delivered a brief but memorable first-movement cadenza.

In the middle two movements even the loudest moments felt slightly restrained. But the excellent phrasing and blending from the four woodwind principals earned them a well-deserved group acknowledgement from Welser-Möst during the applause. Principal flute Joshua Smith sounded particularly elegant all evening.

The conductor treated the quietest moments of the third movement with care, eventually creating a roaring crescendo that connected the Scherzo to the finale. The horns and trumpets, now augmented with trombones, came across gloriously. This was only the first stop on a program exploring light and darkness — and what arrived after intermission was even more interesting.

Leoš Janáček's Suite From the House of the Dead was the only holdover from the evening's original program. But some operatic flavor remained thanks to this three-movement work of instrumental selections from his opera From the House of the Dead.

Like in the Beethoven, this arrangement by František Jílek calls on repeated rhythmic and melodic motifs which pass through different sections of the orchestra in waves. Along with its angstiness, the second movement features some surprisingly memorable melodies. Interjections abounded from a patchwork of percussion: the crash of the tam-tam, the sharp clarity of the glockenspiel, and the crackle of the hand-cranked rattle.

The volatile energy and the quick pivots of the Janáček made the shift back to Beethoven feel abrupt. Leonore Overture No. 3 would likely have worked better as the middle piece of the evening. Still, the orchestra managed to recalibrate and present a refined take on another well-known Beethoven work.

But the triumphant ending of the Janáček had the true last word. The Orchestra will return to the Czech composer's operas with their concert production of Jenůfa in May — and the quality of this performance promises great things ahead.

The program repeats at 8 p.m. Saturday, March 15, at Mandel Concert Hall at Severance Music Center, 11001 Euclid Ave, Cleveland. Tickets starting at \$39, are available at the Severance ticket office or via clevelandorchestra.com.

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