

## Cleveland Women's Orchestra celebrates 90 years at Severance (Mar. 30)

by Stephanie Manning



Of the many orchestra performances held at Severance Music Center in a given year, only one of them features a musician roster made up entirely of women. This brief break from the status quo comes courtesy of the Cleveland Women's Orchestra, which has been performing in the space now known as Mandel Concert Hall for 90 years.

Closing out the final weekend of Women's History Month, the longest-running women's orchestra in the country marked its 90th anniversary with its annual celebration concert. Music director Eric Benjamin led the program on March 30, which leaned traditional with plenty of orchestral standards.

The group's strengths showed brightest in the peppy music that bookended the program. Shostakovich's *Festive Overture* opened the concert on a strong note with even tempos, a healthy group sound, and satisfying bass drum hits. Benjamin's conducting was attentive, but not micromanaging.

Later, Mikhail Ippolitov-Ivanov's "Procession of the Sardar" from *Caucasian Sketches, Suite I* was equally celebratory. Principal clarinet Elizabeth Carney performed her playful and technical solo lines with ease. The afternoon's encore continued the march theme with Johann Strauss' *Radetzky March*, where Benjamin cheerfully spent most of his time conducting the audience — humorously cueing the clapping in and out.

Quieter, more serene moments arrived near the concert's middle, where the group treated Franz Schubert's *Symphony No. 8* with a gentle touch. Rich melodies arose from the cello and bass sections during the two-movement "Unfinished" work. Group intonation became an occasional stumbling block, but the woodwinds enjoyed some time in the

spotlight, topped off with pleasant solos from principal flute Jackie Wood and principal oboe Marsha Kincade.

The only piece by a woman on the program was Margaret Brouwer's *Path at Sunrise, Masses of Flowers*. Written for the CWO's 75th anniversary in 2010, it lends a kind of cinematic quality to the sunrise it depicts, with twinkles of glockenspiel and flute, and pitch bends bouncing around to different instrument sections. Too bad it only lasted eight minutes, making the representation of women composers an uneven ratio, even if an even ratio isn't one of the group's specifically stated goals.

Something the organization does champion, however, is performance opportunities for young artists — and Beethoven's *Triple Concerto* provided the perfect occasion. Cellist Eleanor Pompa, a second-year student at the Cleveland Institute of Music, took the stage together with violinist Olga Dubossarskaya Kaler and pianist Emanuela Friscioni. This combination with two older and more experienced artists allowed Pompa to demonstrate her strengths — like her strong projection — without all the pressure being placed squarely on her shoulders.

The trio of soloists worked together like a chamber group, with the entire orchestra as backup. All were confident in their phrasing and connection with the conductor, especially Kaler. From the podium, Benjamin kept the coordination smooth, never wavering in tempo or letting the orchestra's sound overwhelm the soloists. Friscioni remained a steady presence, while Kaler and Pompa made for graceful duet partners.

The "Masses of Flowers" Brouwer's piece had alluded to then took physical form during the applause, as the three musicians were each handed multiple bouquets — colorful congratulations on a job well done.

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