

Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra wraps up season with emotional performances (May 4)



The Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra performs with conductor Daniel Reith at Severance Music Center. Roger Mastroianni

by Stephanie Manning | Cleveland Classical

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CLEVELAND, Ohio — Spring is always the season of farewells for the [Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra](https://www.clevelandclassical.com) (COYO). Twenty-nine of the middle- and high school musicians who performed in Mandel Concert Hall on Sunday pinned a white flower to their black attire —

signifying that as graduating seniors, their time with the group would shortly come to a bittersweet end.

The May 4 concert at Severance Music Center also bid farewell to COYO's music director Daniel Reith, who has led the ensemble since the fall of 2022. Sunday's event left both students and conductor with plenty to be proud of.

Pianist Saya Uejima, winner of this year's Concerto Competition, gave a poised and graceful performance of Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg's *Piano Concerto*. Her choice of work was a touching tribute to Reith, who has studied and performed extensively in Norway. Grieg's only complete concerto is one of his larger-scale works, and Reith skillfully mediated the interactions between soloist and orchestra.

Uejima radiated calm and focus from the beginning, savoring the expansive first-movement cadenza with captivating effect. Although the string section slightly lost energy in the slow middle movement, this hardly put a damper on the pianist's

performance of Grieg’s emotionally moving melodies. Principal horn Jack Berendt delivered multiple warm solos.

While the upbeat melodies of the finale provided plenty of excitement, Uejima’s gentle arpeggios preceding the “Quasi presto” section — delivered with a lovely thoughtfulness — lingered in the memory even more.

More contemplative moments arrived during the afternoon’s opener, Sarah Kirkland Snider’s *Something for the Dark*. Texture and shape of the musical line come to the forefront of this ten-minute piece, and the players steadily put the music through its trials and tribulations. Harpist Lina Tian, whose fingers hardly stopped moving, easily projected over the orchestra.

Kirkland Snider’s dramatic climax arrived with some bold, thunderous strikes from the snare drum and timpani. Some hesitation cropped up during the quietest moments, but not in the ending, which returns to the opening material before the string section fades into nothingness.

Although the most delicate sections of Edward Elgar’s “*Enigma*” *Variations* experienced a few momentary falters, all were easily smoothed out. The theme and its ensuing fourteen variations — each titled with the initials of one of the British composer’s friends — is best-known for “Nimrod,” its somber ninth variation. COYO gave this famous section a thoughtful interpretation, but even more affecting was the sweeping Variation XII, “B.G.N.,” featuring the confident cello section.

Under Reith’s steady hand, the students seized on the cheerily chromatic Variation III, “R.B.T.,” the joyful Variation VII, “Troyte,” and the perky and well-coordinated Variation X, “Dorabella.”

Although Reith has now bid goodbye to COYO, he’ll be back soon enough, returning to the *Enigma Variations* when he leads The Cleveland Orchestra at Blossom Music Center in August. So after his heartfelt thank-yous to students, staff, and audience, he ended his remarks with a simple message: “Until we meet again.”

Stephanie Manning trained as a bassoonist before becoming a correspondent for ClevelandClassical.com. As a freelancer, her writing has also appeared in The Montreal Gazette, CBC Montreal, and Early Music America.

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