

Cleveland Orchestra's 'Vox humana' haunts with a tale of reconciliation (May 23)



The Cleveland Orchestra's bold and emotionally charged *Vox humana* program wove together opera, sacred music, and avant-garde minimalism to explore the many faces of reconciliation, from raw heartbreak to spiritual resolution. (Getty Images) Getty Images

By Daniel Hathaway | Cleveland Classical

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CLEVELAND, Ohio — Instructions for a classical programming chatbot: design a full-length program of music that illustrates the theme of Reconciliation, using in any combination a narrator, a full symphony orchestra, a mixed chorus, a vocal monologue and an instrumental quintet.

That's not how Friday's *Vox humana* concert at the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Opera & Humanities Festival came to be. But such a prompt might help explain how apparently unrelated works by Francis Poulenc, J.S. Bach, Galina Ustvolskaya and Richard Strauss made it from Franz Welser-Möst's fertile imagination to the Mandel Concert Hall stage.

Based on Jean Cocteau's monodrama, Francis Poulenc's 1958 opera *La voix humaine* presents the audience with one side of a telephone conversation between a jilted woman ("Elle") and her former lover.

As the audience and orchestra were settling in on Friday, French soprano Sarah Aristidou was agitatedly pacing on the elevated opera platform, reading a newspaper, and waiting for a call. Between wrong numbers, dropped calls, and other technological frustrations, we learn that Elle has been abandoned by her lover and that she has attempted to commit suicide by taking sleeping pills.

Phrases like 'Can you hear me now?' And 'Madame, hang up — no, we're not being dramatic' drew laughs from the audience, while revelations about her psychological state demonstrated the gravity of her feelings: 'I don't dare turn on my vanity light — I'm wrinkled like an old woman' and 'No food, overcoat over my bed clothes — I didn't eat.

I was very ill. I thought if I took all of the pills I would sleep without dreams. I felt I could not live any longer.’

This role was truly a workout for Aristidou, who was making her Cleveland Orchestra debut, U.S. debut and role debut on Friday. She was totally committed to her character and elicited sympathy, all the while making you feel that she really should be seeking professional help.

Under the direction of Franz Welser-Möst, The Cleveland Orchestra sounded splendid in a score that is typical Poulenc. Although his orchestration is thick, the composer leaves space for Elle to shine, and her clear, flexible voice filled the hall.

Somehow you get the feeling that the lover on the other end of the line has been through this, time and again, with Elle. Perhaps he takes pleasure in goading her on. *La voix humaine* ends with Elle wrapping the telephone cord around her neck.

“So that’s it? I was just about to say ‘see you soon.’ I love you.” An odd sort of reconciliation.

After intermission, the string section setup was cleared for the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus, who stood downstage to sing J.S. Bach’s motet *Komm, Jesu, komm*.

The Bach was wrapped around Galina Ustvol’skaya’s *Symphony No. 5*, which suggests a large ensemble, but was performed from the elevated platform by a quintet — Liyuan Xie (violin), Frank Rosenwein (oboe), Michael Sachs (trumpet), Richard Stout (euphonium), Yasuhito Sugiyama (tuba) and Marc Damoulakis (percussion). Ustvol’skaya’s haunting music was the perfect backdrop for reciter Tony F. Sias’ gripping delivery of the Lord’s Prayer.

Beautifully sung by the chorus under the direction of Lisa Wong, the Bach would easily have stood on its own as an example of religious reconciliation — as the program notes suggested — but combined with the Ustvol’skaya and its repetitive percussion strikes, took on a mesmerizing ritualistic quality.

An impressively efficient reset by the stage crew accommodated the full orchestra for a ravishing performance of Richard Strauss’ *Symphonic Fantasy on Die Frau ohne Schatten*. Its connection to the reconciliation theme may be no more complicated than Welser-Möst’s emotional reaction to the work — “*beautiful music from an opera that ends with the earthly reunion of the Emperor and the Empress.*”

The program will be repeated tonight at 8 p.m. Tickets are available [online](#).

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