

Cleveland Orchestra performance Saturday at Blossom highlighted by debut of violinist Veronika Eberle (July 19)



The Cleveland Orchestra performed Saturday at Blossom Music Center, featuring the debut of violinist Veronika Eberle. Photo by Scott Esterly, Special to cleveland.com Esterly Photography LLC

By Peter Feher | Cleveland Classical

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CUYAHOGA FALLS, Ohio — Four fateful notes were knocking around in Beethoven's head when he was composing many of his most famous works in his mid-30s.

This motif would, of course, find its supreme expression in his Fifth Symphony, premiered in 1808 and part of the popular imagination ever since. But

just a few years before, Beethoven had tried out a variation on the idea — softer but no less suspenseful — at the beginning of his Violin Concerto.

The crowd at Blossom Music Center last night, Saturday July 19, was remarkably hushed, ready to hear the four faint quarter notes tapped out on timpani that begin the concerto. Over the next 45 minutes, violinist Veronika Eberle elaborated on the sequence in numerous flights of virtuosic fancy, floating high above the solid, sturdy accompaniment of the Cleveland Orchestra. Yet throughout, the performance remained grounded in the quiet clarity of that opening measure.

Cohesion is characteristic of Beethoven at his best. He's the model classical composer because of his ability to expand simple musical statements to symphonic proportions — even in pieces that aren't, strictly speaking, symphonies. And this gets to the challenge of his Violin Concerto, which demands a soloist with not only the endurance to match a full orchestra but also the sensitivity to interpret what might otherwise seem like straightforward material.

The first movement Allegro serves up a substantial helping of scales and arpeggios — somewhat rote on paper and thus requiring a special touch in performance. Eberle brought laser-like precision to the task, her focus especially clear in her high register, where Beethoven keeps the violinist suspended much of the time. It was in these stratospheric heights that she truly began to sing in the slow second movement, soaring with a delicate lyricism that didn't always come through elsewhere in the work.

The cadenzas offered a welcome opportunity to open up, and Eberle tackled the standard ones by early-20th-century virtuoso Fritz Kreisler with flair and finesse. Once underway, the Rondo finale struck a similar balance between romping and refined, recovering from a slightly rough start that saw the soloist and guest conductor Petr Popelka taking two different tempos.

Conscientious to the very end of her Cleveland Orchestra debut, Eberle chose to partner with concertmaster Joel Link for a playful, all-pizzicato encore: Béla Bartók's Duo No. 43 for Two Violins.

After intermission, Robert Schumann's Symphony No. 1 ("Spring") gave Popelka and the Orchestra a chance to throw off a bit of restraint. The score may follow a traditional four-movement classical structure, but the music surges with romantic passion. The upward-sweeping scales that bookend the piece are less an exercise in technical accuracy than a release of raw energy and emotion.

While some of the earlier movements felt unsettled, the drama eventually coalesced in Schumann's finale. A storm of tremolos built in the strings, briefly threatening the sunny atmosphere before dissipating at the call of two French horns and a chirping flute cadenza. Spring or summer, this was the soundtrack of a season that's here to stay.

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