

Cleveland Orchestra honors Rodgers & Hammerstein in dazzling Blossom concert (Aug. 17)



Fans enjoy The Cleveland Orchestra at Blossom Music Center. David Petkiewicz, cleveland.com

By Peter Feher|Cleveland Classical

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CUYAHOGA FALLS, Ohio – If any industry understands the magic of a marquee, it's Broadway. And few names in the history of musical theater have lit up the Great White Way as brilliantly as Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II.

Together, the composer and lyricist have been a box-office draw for close to a century, from the smashing success of their first collaboration, “Oklahoma!” (1943) to the packed crowd they drew for The Cleveland Orchestra’s concert at Blossom Music Center on Sunday, Aug. 17.

A versatile trio of vocal soloists shared the spotlight with the ensemble under guest pops conductor Andy Einhorn, but the evening ultimately belonged to the singular duo who transformed the art of songwriting for the stage.

Across two decades that came to define the Golden Age of American musical theater, Rodgers and Hammerstein set out to combine story and score with a sincere commitment to the form. That might sound abstract, but Sunday’s performance made this achievement vivid in song after song.

numbers penned with other creative partners. Tunes such as “All the Things You Are” (by Hammerstein and composer Jerome Kern) and “With a Song in My Heart” (by Rodgers and lyricist Lorenz Hart) may have debuted on Broadway, but they’re better known today as jazz standards.

The story here rested entirely in the musical delivery, and vocalists Jacob Dickey and Ben Davis stuck to a suave baritone style that suited the material well — you don't have to be Frank Sinatra to croon these melodies. Another Rodgers and Hart selection, "Falling in Love With Love," featured Scarlett Strallen in full soprano mode — as the song was first heard in the 1938 musical "The Boys From Syracuse."

The more familiar fare, beginning with a suite from "The Sound of Music," allowed the performers to showcase their acting chops, both comedic and dramatic. Strallen, whose Broadway and West End credits include the title role in "Mary Poppins," channeled her best Julie Andrews for a romp through "The Lonely Goatherd," with Dickey and Davis yodeling in the background. The three then harmonized on "Climb Ev'ry Mountain," soaring to serious vocal heights and sending the audience aloft into intermission.

The concert's second half treated many individual songs as skits. Dickey and Davis shed their suit jackets and put on paper sailor hats for a humorously down-and-out rendition of "Nothing Like a Dame" from "South Pacific." Meanwhile, Strallen, in the second of her three evening gowns for the night, waltzed around the stage with Dickey during "Shall We Dance?" from "The King and I."

Davis, the standout vocalist throughout the program, had an entire scene to himself in the soul-searching "Soliloquy" from "Carousel," which he interpreted with a sweeping range of emotion.

The orchestra alone shone in instrumental selections at the start of each half: first the grandly imposing Overture from the "King and I" and then the kaleidoscopic showpiece of "The Carousel Waltz."

And everyone joined together for a finale of the title number from "Oklahoma!" and an encore of "You'll Never Walk Alone" — that last song the perfect ode to a partnership guided by a greater purpose.

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