

Oberlin Chamber Orchestra
with cellist Nathaniel Abreu
(Sept. 25)

By Max Newman



For sheer polish of performance, under the direction of Raphael Jiménez, the Oberlin Chamber Orchestra is an ensemble that can scarcely be faulted. On the crisp fall evening of September 25, the Orchestra kicked off its 2025-26 season at Finney Chapel in a familiar vein: the well-rounded performance of three pieces, monumental in sound and cinematic in narrative. The Orchestra was able to simultaneously create the sensation of enormous musical objects and patchworks of delicate moments.

Ruth Crawford Seeger's *Rissolty Rossolty* (1939), was a stirring rollercoaster ride of an opener. Its first moments was a guided journey through a pastoral, woodwind-dotted landscape, with staccato bassoon, clarinet, flute, and oboe tangents framed by earnest strings. These more lighthearted stylings quickly gave way to more foreboding waves of low sound, anchored upon angry scrapes of bass. Just as quickly as the piece entered into darkness, it exited it, sounding like the soundtrack to the beginning of a stirring adventure.

William Grant Still's *Wood Notes* was almost impossibly lush. There was hardly a moment that was not awash with strings, filling Finney Chapel with longing, melancholic sound. More clipped gestures from the winds stylings that broke up this wall of sound in unexpected ways. In the last movement, "Whippoorwill's Shoes," angular notes thrillingly contrasted with slower passages.

The centerpiece of the evening was Antonin Dvorak's *Cello Concerto*, featuring concerto competition winner Nathaniel Abreu, a singular, virtuosic force, who piloted the piece and brought Finney Chapel to an emotional fever pitch. With impassioned strokes of his bow, his highest notes were penetrating, his lowest like seismic events.

In between, his tone was a robust complement to the feathery flutes and oboes and a contrast to the languid lushness of the string section.

In the opening movement, Abreu was pensive and apprehensive as though pondering an impossible dilemma. The mellow second movement accentuated the raucousness of the opening of the third. Abreu's spellbinding execution of the yearning melody stood stark against a hushed accompaniment before breaking through in a moment of explosive joy — the perfect conclusion to a concert that was expressive and exquisite right until the very last moment.

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