

Cleveland Orchestra at Severance with Yo-Yo Ma delights (Nov. 6)



The Cleveland Orchestra and Yo-Yo Ma delighted at Severance Music Center. Photo by Yevhen Gulenko. Human Artist Photography + Cinema

By Kevin McLaughlin|Cleveland Classical

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CLEVELAND, Ohio — Yo-Yo Ma was the picture of cello perfection on Thursday evening, Nov. 6 at Severance Music Center, performing with The Cleveland Orchestra as if for the thousandth time — or the first.

Relaxed, head tilted in his familiar way, he seemed tuned to some private channel of truth and beauty. When not playing, he listened with delight, urging on the musicians around him.

Ma offered Dvořák's Cello Concerto at the end of "An Evening with Yo-Yo Ma," beautifully wrapped like an early holiday gift. He strode onstage with purpose, revealing a heart as large as the hall, making his entrance not as a soloist demanding attention, but as a voice rising from within. He answered the horn heroics with warmth, then crooned the second theme like a benediction.

Ma's sound projected well even when the Orchestra soared. Conductor James Feddeck was an attentive partner, keeping the texture transparent and allowing the cello's lowest tones and every woodwind echo to be heard. In quieter passages, Ma leaned in toward the players, as if to listen rather than lead, his phrasing breathing with theirs.

In the Adagio, the clarinets traded phrases with the solo cello as if in quiet conversation. Both let the line bloom — tender but unsentimental. Dvořák's longing for home spoke through Feddeck's baton, drawing precise and personal exchanges between soloist and Orchestra.

The Finale was brisk, full of fire and farewell. Ma played with athletic grace, bow flashing. When the music looked back in those quiet pages Dvořák added in memory of his sister-in-law, who had been his first love, his sound softened into prayer. The closing pages showed Ma's strength without hardness, brilliance without vanity.

After much applause Ma presented two encores: the traditional Catalan tune “The Song of the Birds” (a favorite of Pablo Casals) and J.S. Bach’s Prelude from the First Cello Suite.

Thursday’s unusual program format began with three overtures. By the 1870s, operetta had become so identified with Vienna that a waltz, a glass of sparkling wine, and a touch of hanky-panky felt more like civic duties than plot devices.

The Overture to Johann Strauss’s “Die Fledermaus” is a pageant of waltzes and polkas, a snapshot of the city’s gilded age. After a slightly shaky start, Feddeck and the Orchestra found unity in whipped cream. Frank Rosenwein’s off-kilter oboe solo was *echt* Viennese, as were the snare drummer’s cockeyed afterbeats.

Feddeck steered Mozart’s Overture to “Don Giovanni” through its opening solemn tones, then it was off to the races with restless strings, quicksilver scales and the suggestion of a notorious escape. Comedy and danger shared the stage and the music charmed even as it closed in.

Warming to his task, Feddeck burst open the doors to Dvořák’s “Carnival Overture” as if onto a street fair — bright, noisy, and full of dancing. The brass called out, strings bustled, a tambourine went wild. When the revelers tired, a tender pause ensued. Like much of Dvořák’s music, the overture’s revelry is balanced by homesickness. Its quiet center, a lyrical interlude amid the bustle, hinted at the sentiment that would soon blossom in the Cello Concerto.

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