

### Cleveland Orchestra's MLK Celebration Concert lifted spirits with affirming reflection (Jan 11)



By Kevin McLaughlin|Cleveland Classical

*This article was originally published on [Cleveland.com](https://www.cleveland.com)*

CLEVELAND, Ohio — In a political moment that might have provoked heaviness or solemn reflection, The Cleveland Orchestra's annual Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Celebration Concert chose affirmation instead.

The 46th Annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Celebration Concert Sunday, January 11, at 7 PM The Cleveland Orchestra Taichi Fukumura, conductor Latonia Moore, soprano Chris Webb, host Martin Luther King, Jr. Celebration Chorus Dr. William Henry Caldwell, chorus director and conductor Photo by Roger Mastroianni Roger Mastroianni

Led by assistant conductor Taichi Fukumura before a full Mandel Concert Hall, the Orchestra, soprano Latonia Moore, and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Celebration Chorus, under Dr. William Henry Caldwell, lifted spirits — and even got the audience to sing along.

Beethoven's "Egmont Overture" has come to signify heroic defiance and the enduring human struggle for freedom — qualities that are well-placed in a concert honoring the life and work of Dr. King. As an opener, it was exciting and sufficiently dramatic.



Latonia Moore's first major contribution came in the spiritual "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands," and it immediately recalibrated the room. Singing without a microphone, her first high notes rose like

and electric current above orchestra and chorus — effulgent, centered, and thrilling.

“Bound for Canaan’s Land” followed, and here the Martin Luther King, Jr. Celebration Chorus took over. Under Caldwell’s direction, they projected confidence and a serene grace. A baritone soloist sang with clarity and warmth.

Joel Thompson’s “An Act of Resistance” was one of the evening’s quiet shocks. Rhythmically direct and slightly theatrical, the piece gave the percussion — xylophone, snare, tom-toms — a central role both as timekeepers and agents of resistance.

After what sounded like the end of the piece (prompting premature applause), a quiet reiteration of the central motive began. One by one, orchestral musicians stood in front of a silent chorus and sang the theme themselves — courageous instrumentalists unaccustomed to raising their voices.

As more players joined in, the gesture became a protest song, solemn and resolute. Brian Raphael Nabors’ “Pulse,” written for orchestra alone, continued the emphasis on rhythm and collective energy.

Every section was busy, but percussionists again played an outsized role, contributing fields of color and driving the momentum. Fukumura’s reading was taut and exhilarating.

The emotional center of the evening arrived in the second half with two contemporary gospel anthems: Richard Smallwood’s “Total Praise” and Hezekiah Walker’s “Every Praise Is to Our God.” The audience began joining in well before Caldwell’s invitation, and the hall briefly became a single chorus. It was radiant, communal, and unapologetically joyful.

Spoken-word artist and Emmy-winning journalist Chris Webb brought warmth and ease to his role as emcee. Weaving reflections on Dr. King’s life and historical context for the music into his introductions, he held the audience with the quiet authority of a gifted storyteller.

Latonia Moore was splendid throughout the evening. Beyond the early spirituals, she convinced fully as a classical singer. In Rossini’s “Inflammatus from the Stabat Mater,” for example, her tone was gleaming, her vibrato controlled, her projection effortless. And what a high register.

In his first year as assistant conductor of The Cleveland Orchestra, Taichi Fukumura proved fully equal to the demands of this sprawling program. He guided orchestra, chorus, and soloists with calm authority and clear musical intention.

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Celebration Chorus, led by Dr. William Henry Caldwell, was the heart of the performance. At their best — particularly in the spirituals and gospel works — they were eloquent advocates, their faces and bodies reflecting engagement without excess.

The evening closed by custom with James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson's "Lift Every Voice and Sing," with the crowd standing and singing along in confident unison.

The audience, now stirred and spent, left the hall a-buzz, chatting, comparing notes, and still singing.

Prior to the performance the 2026 Cleveland Orchestra MLK, Jr. Service in the Arts Awards were presented to:

Honey Bell-Bey, poet and public health advocate

Prester Pickett, playwright and professor

Dianna Richardson, orchestra director and educator

Greg L. Reese Performing Arts Center at the East Cleveland Public Library.

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*Published on ClevelandClassical.com January 14, 2026*

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