

Cleveland Orchestra with Alain Altinoglu and Alisa Weilerstein at Severance (Feb 26)



By Daniel Hathaway|Cleveland Classical

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CLEVELAND, Ohio — The Cleveland Orchestra’s program on Thursday at Severance Music Center looked strange on paper, beginning as it did with the Cleveland premiere of an intellectually thorny cello concerto and ending with two of

Richard Strauss’s dazzling tone poems played back-to-back.

But Til Eulenspiegel’s Merry Pranks and Don Juan proved to be effective palate cleansers following Alisa Weilerstein’s commanding performance of Unsuk Chin’s Cello Concerto. Setting its challenges for the listener aside, you could concede control over the proceedings and let conductor Alain Altinoglu be your tour guide through the mischievous and lascivious exploits of the two bad boys that Strauss immortalized in his virtuosic scores.

Chin’s concerto packs an abundance of color into 30 minutes. Cast in four movements, only the first is titled (“Aniri,” referring to a particular Korean narrative format), the rest are prefaced only by metronome markings.

Aniri begins with heartbeats in the harps under a sad, yearning cello line. Two motives conflict with one another, but the heartbeat keeps returning. A loud orchestral crash fractures the texture.

The second movement opens with a call and response between soloist and percussion. The tempo increases until a mad dash to the finish brings the movement to a close.



In the third, a searching cello line moves up and down the entire range of the instrument, and at the end, the juxtaposition of the ascending cello and descending contrabassoon was captivating.

The fourth begins with a jagged orchestra introduction answered by the soloist, whose cascading notes move up and down the fingerboard. Then the soloist and orchestra agree to go their

separate ways (“You do your thing, and I’ll do mine.”)

In Chin’s work, the soloist and orchestra are not always harmonious partners but are often at odds with each other. Whether playing lyrically with a rich, centered tone, or joining in extended technique colloquies with the orchestra, Weilerstein projected beautifully above the often dense orchestration, and her bow control on the work’s many long, sustained notes was amazing. Throughout, Altinoglu kept everything neat and tidy, never imposing himself more than needed.

Although the house was only about half full on Thursday, an enthusiastic standing ovation was strong and spontaneous. Alisa Weilerstein responded elegantly with the Sarabande from J.S. Bach’s Fourth Cello Suite.

Completing the program with two 15-minute Strauss tone poems sounded contrived, but it worked — not in small part due to the excellent, relaxed playing of The Cleveland Orchestra. This music is embedded in their DNA, and they match the composer’s virtuosic orchestral writing with playing that looks organic and easy.

Wonderful, bold solos were provided by principal horn Nathaniel Silberslag in Till, where agile solos were the work of concertmaster Joel Link, mocking jeers from E-flat clarinetist Daniel McKelway accompanied the prankster’s march to the scaffold, and multiple wind comments were passed from player to player.

Fine solos by Link, cellist Richard Weiss, and oboist Frank Rosenwein also decorated the exploits of Don Juan, perfectly paced by Altinoglu, but it was whole sections’ turn to put across lush melodies and the famous, noble horn calls that couldn’t have been better.

The program will be repeated on Friday and Saturday at 7:30 pm. Tickets are available [online](#).

Photos by Yevhen Gulenko

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