

Elim Chan dials up the intensity in her second week with The Cleveland Orchestra (Mar. 19)



By Stephanie Manning|Cleveland Classical

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

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Few guest conductors have the luxury of back-to-back weeks with The Cleveland Orchestra. After setting the tone last week with one of classical music's most famous pieces — Beethoven's Fifth — Elim Chan turned up the

heat on Thursday, March 19, at Severance Music Center with a program of bold 20th- and 21st-century music.

While some choices landed unevenly, what remained most memorable was the evening's intensity — not just in emotion, but also in the sheer force of sound.

The conductor's sharp, detail-oriented style served her well in the pointillistic opening to Daniel Kidane's *Sun Poem*, which bounces sounds and fragments around the orchestra. Kidane's ode to fatherhood that inspired the piece makes for a beautiful context, although that vision can be difficult to discern musically.

Kidane does briefly develop it into something longer and sweeter, and Chan softened her movements to mirror that. But all too quickly, the music retreats back into an unsettled mood and ending.

Chan returned to her staccato conducting style for Béla Bartók's *Dance Suite*, a fun piece that shifts between a variety of tunes all reminiscent of folk songs, but actually created by Bartók. The composer's playfulness with orchestration and textures is particularly

engaging. Catherine Van Handel's bassoon solos added the perfect amount of levity to the first and third movements and violist Gareth Zehngut contributed a lovely, brief solo in the finale.

The other Bartók work on the program, his Violin Concerto No. 1, explores the composer's infatuation with the violinist Stefi Geyer, who eventually rejected his advances. Beginning with a solo cadenza and smaller dialogue with the violin section, the work eventually expands to paint a larger portrait of Geyer and Bartók's attraction to her.

Making her Cleveland Orchestra debut, violinist Patricia Kopatchinskaja brought plenty of dramatic flair to the concerto, leaning into all of its extremes — she opened the second movement with outright aggression. But much of the time, her approach and the Orchestra's didn't feel emotionally aligned, though the first movement's softer and sweetly romantic passages achieved some beautiful harmony.

Physicality formed a huge part of Kopatchinskaja's presence. She would frequently turn around, leaning toward and imitating sounds from the orchestra. While this may not have always worked in the best interest of the concerto, her authentic display of love and passion for this music clearly won the audience over, and their enthusiastic ovation quickly brought her out for an encore.

“Don't try to understand — it's complete nonsense,” she warned us before launching into a very short, chaotic collection of twangs, slides, and spoken sound effects that produced some incredulous laughter.

To conclude the concert, Chan and The Orchestra gave a memorable performance of Alexander Scriabin's “A Poem of Ecstasy,” a piece that packed the stage to the gills with extra brass and percussion and produced both the loudest and softest moments of the evening. During its bursts of intensity, the Orchestra filled the hall with sound from every angle.

As the final chord blazed on, the conductor bounced on her heels and twirled her baton in excitement — clearly loving the moment and hardly wanting it to end.

The program will be repeated on Friday at 11:00 am and Saturday at 7:30 pm.

Photo by Aireonna McCall-Dube

Stephanie Manning trained as a bassoonist before becoming a correspondent for ClevelandClassical.com. As a freelancer, she has also published articles with Signal Cleveland, The Montreal Gazette, and Carnegie Hall.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com March 25, 2026

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)