

## Cleveland Women's Orchestra at Severance Music Center (Apr. 19)

by Daniel Hathaway



Eric Benjamin ended his brief tenure as music director of the Cleveland Women's Orchestra with an engaging concert of mostly French music on Sunday afternoon, April 19 in Mandel Concert Hall at Severance Music Center.

The performance marked Benjamin's second visit to the Severance podium in the company of one of America's

few remaining women's ensembles. CWO has grown artistically during his two years at the helm, and he leaves the orchestra in good hands for his successor.

Sunday's program began with a rarity, Camille Saint-Saëns' *Overture to La Princesse Jaune*. Benjamin drew a lush sound from his players during the introduction, and the ensuing allegro made for an enjoyable opener, both vigorous and charming.

The conductor gave a humorous preface to the premiere performance of the young University of Akron composer Sarah Hegenderfer's *Blood Moon*, which he programmed for CWO after hearing her music performed for the first time earlier in the season by the Akron Symphony.

Named after the phenomenon that occurs during a total lunar eclipse, when the Earth moves directly between the sun and the moon, causing the moon to take on a red glow, the piece opens with pensive flute and oboe solos accompanied by shimmering high strings.

Short percussion and harp notes cue a march under long chords. A beautiful melody draws the work into a major key at the end. Hegenderfer's interest in film music is apparent, but she is also finding her individual voice. The composer was on hand to acknowledge the warm audience ovation from the stage.

César Franck's *Symphony in d minor* closed the first half of the concert in the key that Benjamin told the audience reminds him of mahogany furniture. He paced the performance skilfully, drawing a rich, full-bodied sound from the orchestra, and building wonderful climaxes.

Gentle pizzicatos supported an elegant English horn solo by Jennifer Ledyard in the second movement, and inner viola lines came through handsomely.

A noble reading of the finale brought Franck's only symphony to a satisfying conclusion.

After the intermission came an exquisite performance of Maurice Ravel's *Pavane pour en infant defunte* featuring fine horn playing by Anna Shelow and beautifully blended winds. Benjamin took his time with the tempo, but never allowed the piece to become over indulgent. This was one of the highlights of the afternoon.



Sunday's concerto was last on the program — an unusual position, but one that suited the extroverted character of Saint-Saëns' *Piano Concerto No. 2*, which begins with a long, ruminative cadenza, becomes playful in the second movement (inciting chuckles from the audience) and downright outrageous in the third.

Angelin Chang's interpretation of the solo part occasionally strayed from gallic elegance in the direction of athletic virtuosity. She erupted into the Presto with violent energy and spirit, daring her colleagues to keep up, which they did. The concerto came to a boisterous conclusion, bringing the large crowd quickly to their feet.

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