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Cleveland Orchestra Chorus celebrates 75 years with Corigliano, Whitacre (Oct. 24)



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CLEVELAND, OHIO — On Saturday, October 24, Lisa Wong and The Cleveland Orchestra Chorus threw themselves a 75th Anniversary party in Mandel Concert Hall at Severance Music Center. Packing the auditorium with an enthusiastic audience that included a significant number of young people, they gifted them with superb performances of works by American composers John Corigliano and Eric Whitacre.

Serenaded on arrival in the Grand Foyer by the Cleveland Orchestra Children's Chorus, the audience got a taste of the impressive vocal prowess to come, and the adult singers were greeted with applause when the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus very efficiently filed onstage.

The short first half of the program opened with a heartfelt performance of John Corigliano's Fern Hill. Composed in 1960 to a text by Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, Saturday's concert marked the first time the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus had performed the work.

Corigliano has written that the subject of one of Thomas's poems captivated him: "the poet's "young and easy" summers at his family's farm of the same name. I wanted to write this work as a gift for my high-school music teacher, Mrs. Bella Tillis, who first encouraged my musical ambitions. She introduced Fern Hill with piano accompanying her (and, once, my) school choir."



High quality verse cries out for excellent sung diction, and the well-blended COC supplied it throughout the 17-minute piece, which was sensitively led by Wong, and accompanied by the composer's reduced orchestration. Soprano Stephanie Popik's clear, crystalline tone projected easily into the hall.

Eric Whitacre's Eternity in an Hour was the US premiere of a Co-commission by The Cleveland Orchestra and Orchestra Chorus. Lasting almost exactly 60 minutes, Whitacre's piece sets the famous eight opening lines of British mystical poet and artist William Blake's Auguries of Innocence (1809). The composer told the audience that he first read Blake's poem when he was seventeen and has always thought it provided a way to live one's life.

The instrumental component featured cellist Mark Kosower, percussionist Marc Damoullakis, electric pianist Daniel Overly, and Whitacre himself magnificently operating a collection of synthesizers on a table in front of him when he wasn't busy conducting the chorus. Damoulakis signaled the beginnings of new movements with subtle strokes on crotales.

The rich-sounding chorus, manipulated electronically, bears the expressive burden of the work's message, put across in fragmented bits and pieces, and repeated, swelling in volume, until they achieve mantra status.

Other electronic effects included deep tones and rumblings that originally sounded like pedal notes on the Skinner organ but could only have been synthesized. A wonderfully-played instrumental interlude was inserted during No. IV "In a wild flower," and the collective sound grew and grew until an overpowering moment in No. VIII, "In an hour."

The emotional impact of participating as a witness to the stunning performance of Whitacre's magnificent piece defies verbal description. It was one of those "you had to be there" experiences. If perhaps you missed it, the performance will be available on Adella to watch on demand for 14 days.

Photos by Kevin Libal

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