

Review**Cleveland Orchestra at Blossom with
Jean-Yves Thibaudet (July 6)**

by Guytano Parks



Mother Nature let loose her fury this past Saturday evening at Blossom Music Center just as The Cleveland Orchestra under the baton of conductor Franz Welser-Möst was about to begin Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge*. The music is brusque enough without the rumblings of thunder which accompanied it, and a bit more than halfway through the piece a torrential downpour all but drowned out anything played under a *mezzo forte* level. However it was quite discernible that this was a probing and driven performance of serious intent in which the distraction failed to foil conductor and orchestra. Patrons may recall a recent performance in November 2012 in the more favorable acoustic conditions of Severance Hall where the sections of repose, resplendent in their many subtle shades of softness, were more audible.

As the piano was moved into place before the second piece on the program — Liszt's *Totentanz* — the downpour strengthened, causing members of the orchestra to leave their seats to wait it out in the sidelines as an announcement over the sound system invited audience members on the lawn to take shelter in the pavilion. At last, a let-up, and piano soloist Jean-Yves Thibaudet and conductor Welser-Möst took to the Blossom stage.

From the onset, Thibaudet took hold of the reins as he dug deeply into the bass end of the keyboard during the opening and throughout this dance of death. Inspired by the *Symphonie fantastique* by Berlioz, this paraphrase on the *Dies irae* theme includes some of the most fiendish and diabolic pianistic manipulations in all the literature. Thibaudet met all of its daunting challenges head-on with spine-tingling exuberance and bravura.

A few more rumblings of thunder found their way into this performance as well, but that did not deter the forces on stage from casting a spell with the many interesting and unusual sounds and effects in this showpiece. Welser-Möst was ever-attentive and inspiring in his leadership as the pianist played with scintillating and nuanced detail in the softer sections and with ferocious virtuosity in the extroverted passages. The conclusion was met with resounding and enthusiastic applause. It may be of interest to note that Jean-Yves Thibaudet was second place winner in the 1979 Casadesus International Piano Competition, forerunner of The Cleveland International Piano Competition.

After intermission came a dynamic *Symphony No. 3, "Eroica"* by Beethoven. Welser-Möst's focus, directness of approach and excellent choices of tempi distinguished this reading which paid meticulous attention to the many details in Beethoven's epic score. The *sforzando* jabs, many shifts in tonality and clever and inventive use of motifs and themes in the first movement were carefully scaled, adding to the virile strength and steadiness of the performance. The pain and anguish expressed in the second movement *Funeral March* was profound and heart-wrenching.

Welser-Möst and the orchestra achieved perfect execution in the *Scherzo* as repeated staccato notes, at first *pianissimo* then swelling to *forte*, were met with arresting syncopated interjections. The fine playing of the three horns in the trio section which evoked a hunting scene created a feeling of exhilaration.

The *Finale* proceeded at a good clip and again paid close attention to the many details in the score. Developing from only a *pianissimo* bass line to which a countermelody is added, then a dance tune, it built in variation form to a closing of brilliant and heroic proportions.

Welser-Möst acknowledged several of the principal players with individual bows for their many well-played solos throughout the symphony as the audience cheered during its standing ovation.

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