

An evening with the Cleveland Orchestra

By Alex Lantier
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This writer recently had the opportunity to attend a concert of the Cleveland Orchestra, directed by guest conductor James Conlon. The orchestra, founded in 1918, has long been considered one of America's best—an opportunity to hear them play is not to be missed, despite ticket prices.

Conlon has directed orchestras in Rotterdam, Cologne, and Paris. He now heads the Los Angeles Opera and teaches at several of US summer music festivals: Aspen, Ravinia and Tanglewood. He has been for some time a champion of the music of composers killed or forced to flee Europe by the Nazis—a much-under-appreciated group including Alexander von Zemlinsky, Kurt Weill, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Erwin Schulhoff, Karl Amadeus Hartmann and Ernst Krenek.

The piano soloist was Jonathan Biss, a 27-year-old graduate of the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia and the son of noted violinist Miriam Fried.

The program was:

La Valse, by Maurice Ravel

La Mer, by Claude Debussy

Intermission

Piano Concerto #4

Leonore Overture #3, both by Ludwig van Beethoven.

The reasons for the decision to play the works in reverse chronological order—they date from 1920, 1905, 1808, and 1806 respectively—were not completely clear. Closing with an overture is perhaps an amusing slap in the face at tradition, but this listener found the effort to refocus his attention from the vast scale of *La Mer* to the more intimate one of the piano concerto a bit wrenching. Perhaps stubbornly, this review will consider the pieces in chronological order.

The overture may be the most performed of several Beethoven wrote for his opera, *Fidelio*. With a libretto of Joseph Sonnleithner based on a French text by Jean-Nicolas Bouilly, the opera tells the story of Leonore, who disguises herself as a prison guard and takes on the name of Fidelio in order to rescue her husband, Florestan, from death as a political prisoner. It is one of Beethoven's more explicit testimonials to his democratic political sympathies.

The overture exhibits to the highest degree a characteristic trait of his music: the ability to produce immense tension and drama with ostensibly simple musical devices—delaying the resolution of a basic harmonic sequence, forcing listeners to strain to hear the music by instructing musicians to play very softly, etc.

It begins with a long descending scale, played very slowly and quietly. One wonders when things will finally change. Melodies from the opera begin to appear, notably the theme Florestan sings at the beginning of Act II of the opera, when he has a vision of Leonore coming to save him. The second main theme is a faster, hopeful melody, introduced once softly in a low register, and then rising in volume and pitch. The two themes alternate and intermingle. After

calls from an offstage trumpet, traditionally taken to symbolize the arrival of justice, and a long, almost agonizing build-up of scales in the stringed instruments, the second theme returns to bring the piece triumphantly to a close.

Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto was the last one Beethoven himself premiered publicly. He had begun his adult career in the 1790s largely as a concert pianist in Vienna, amazing his listeners with his remarkable energy and ability to improvise. Facing his growing deafness, which he hid from the public, he progressively retired from concert life starting in 1802 and devoted himself to composition—a task which he carried out with almost superhuman devotion.

Beethoven's music from this period has typically been labeled "heroic," partly due to the courage and determination it conveys, and partly as a reference to his great Third Symphony (the so-called *Eroica*)—which he initially dedicated to Napoleon, a dedication he crossed out on the score upon hearing in 1804 that Napoleon had had himself crowned emperor in Paris.

In this context, the concerto's intimate character was quite striking. The first movement (part of the concerto) dispenses with the traditional orchestral introduction, with the piano playing the main melody alone. The trend towards alternating between the piano playing alone and the orchestra playing alone is particularly marked in the second movement—Biss and the orchestra created a very special moment at the end, when soloist and orchestra finally play together. The last movement is a smooth, somewhat understated *rondo* (quick, repetitive piece based on a catchy melody).

Biss seems a talented pianist, with a sure sense of timing and a light touch that produces fluid, glistening scales and passage work. This reviewer—who confesses to a limited acquaintance with Beethoven's piano music—will simply add that he would be happy to hear Biss play again.

The other half of the concert consisted of two pieces by Debussy and Ravel, the greatest representatives of musical Impressionism. Neither composer liked the term, but it stuck nonetheless because it so aptly described the sensations provoked in the listener by their daring new harmonies, masterful use of tone color, and shimmering lyricism. Moreover, like the Impressionist painters before them, their brilliant innovations met with derision and hostility from the French bourgeois press and artistic establishment.

Though hardly a political leftist, Debussy's musical career was a product of the 1871 Paris Commune—the world's first workers' government, which sprang up amid the defeat of French emperor Napoleon III in his war against Prussia, after which the Prussian army besieged Paris. The Commune was ultimately crushed by French government troops, as the Prussian army stood aside. Tens of thousands of Parisians were executed and many more jailed or deported.

Debussy's father, Manuel-Achille, met Charles de Sivry when both were in Satory prison for having fought for the Commune. Having had some lessons from an Italian violinist in southern France while a refugee from the war, the young Claude took piano lessons from Sivry's mother, Mme. Mauté de Fleurville—the mother-in-law of the famous poet, Paul Verlaine, and reportedly a former student of Frédéric Chopin. Only a year later, at age 10, Debussy managed the feat of being accepted to the Paris National Conservatory in piano—while his family, still deprived of “family and civil rights,” was living in a tiny two-room apartment in north Paris.

Debussy was a rebellious pupil, whose unorthodox writing frustrated his harmony and counterpoint professors. He struggled to find his own style and was forced to write according to traditional rules to compete in the Prix de Rome competition, the highest musical distinction at the time, which gave winners a stipend to study in Rome. After returning from Rome in 1887, he attended poet Stéphane Mallarmé's Tuesday dinners, meeting much of the Parisian artistic avant-garde, and heard Javanese gamelan music at the 1889 Universal Exposition in Paris. One of the first works of his mature style, the 1894 *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, is based on a Mallarmé poem.

Debussy's music was initially much criticized in the press, but his popularity with audiences gradually won over press critics during the 1890s and early 1900s. Despite an unsuccessful premiere, *La Mer* soon established itself as a major piece in the orchestral repertoire; it is one of this reviewer's childhood favorites.

In the first movement, fragments of melody in harp, winds, and string tremolos coalesce into the rolling first theme, initially stated in the clarinets and horns; the second theme, starting as a chorale by the cellos, metamorphoses as it moves around the orchestra, ending as a brass fanfare that builds to a roar and then vanishes. The second movement consists of a series of running melodies, passed between the strings, winds (particularly the English horn), building to a climax, which dies away with muted trumpet then flute over harps and strings. The final movement starts with a storm that moves from the cellos to the brass, then calms down to a remarkably sensual flute and oboe solo over low strings and violin harmonics, and picks up strength again, ending in a thunderclap from the timpani.

The final piece on the program, Ravel's *La Valse*, was first sketched the year after *La Mer*'s first performance, but was not finished until 1920. A felicitous composer of waltzes, notably with his 1911 *Valses Nobles et Sentimentales*, Ravel had planned *La Valse* (Wien—Vienna) as a tribute to the great Viennese composer of waltzes, Johann Strauss. However, between the first sketches of the piece and its completion lay the shattering experience of World War I.

Ravel was horrified by the war, in which he served as a truck driver, including at Verdun. He found it difficult to compose afterwards. During the war, he wrote letters opposing the boycott of German or Austro-Hungarian music in concerts in France. Afterwards, though an intensely private and reserved individual, he did not shrink from bitter criticism of French imperialism. In one song of his 1925 *Chansons madécasses* cycle, *Méfiez-vous des blancs* (“Beware the whites”), a native of Madagascar—then a French colony—criticizes whites for building forts and massacring natives with cannon-fire, then explains that all the whites have been exterminated by storms and poisoned winds.

In its program notes for *La Valse*, the Chicago Symphony notes: “Fate now made the waltz a bitter reminder of a vanished era.... Due to widespread famine, in 1918 the official daily food rations [in

Vienna] were 5.8 ounces of bread, 1.2 ounces of flour, 1.6 ounces of meat, 0.175 ounces of fat, 0.9 ounces of sugar, and 2.45 ounces of potatoes per person. That year, a flu epidemic broke out, killing the painter Gustav Klimt, the architect Otto Wagner, and Freud's daughter Sophie.”

In the score to *La Valse*, Ravel wrote that it described an “imperial court circa 1855”; he later commented that the piece inspired in him the impression of a “fantastical and fatal twirling.” It is, in fact, not so much a picture of the waltz as of a world coming apart.

It is a tribute to Ravel's art that he was able to create such an effect with an intensely beautiful piece of music. *La Valse* has all the typical strengths of Ravel's music: taut formal structure, acidic harmonies and thrilling rhythmic drive. However, it is far from a normal, graceful waltz: double basses, brass, and percussion make odd interjections, the melody passes to unusual tone colors (bass clarinets, contrabassoons, violins playing in high positions on low strings to produce a husky sound, etc.), and rhythm gets dangerously unbalanced. The piece feels like it is always about to burst out of control.

La Valse begins with bassoons and bass clarinets playing snippets of waltz music over a rhythmic accompaniment in the double basses. It moves into a series of waltzes based on the initial melodic fragments, often interrupted by suspiciously military-sounding snare drums and bass drum rolls. These waltzes build to a climax, after which the piece briefly returns to the initial bassoon and bass clarinet melodies. This time, however, the build-up is far more abrupt; the orchestra picks up speed, gusts of sound tear through the music, the downbeat disappears briefly, and the piece ends with five accented notes screamed by the entire orchestra in unison.

Videos of some of the pieces mentioned in this article are available on YouTube:

Beethoven: *Symphony #3*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFltqVS8d9I>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GVQtcd0clu4>

Debussy: *La Mer*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1OFT8fBLQt4>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yj9c8XCd4CE>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7F8_K2llfY

Ravel: *La Valse*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MmboDwY7Sas>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGn5hZYis6s>

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