

Guest conductor Semyon Bychkov leads Cleveland Orchestra on vibrant journey

By Zachary Lewis, The Plain Dealer



REVIEW

A common point of praise in classical music is to label a conductor and his program well-matched.

Less often does one encounter the tantalizing case where a program and its leader actually resemble each other, in which the music and the performer share a certain quality or spirit.

That, though, is exactly what listeners can expect with the Cleveland Orchestra this weekend at Severance Hall. In his debut with the orchestra, conductor Semyon Bychkov applies his globetrotting mentality and vibrant hand to three scores whose shape, mood, or purpose are, like him, in flux.

Russian-born but a citizen of the U.S., with a schedule spanning the western hemisphere, Bychkov, currently chief conductor of the West German Radio Symphony Orchestra, is truly a citizen of the world. Likewise, his deeply cohesive program of Ravel, Dutilleux, and Schumann not only flies over vastly different musical territory but also grapples seriously with notions of change and impermanence.

Ravel's "Le Tombeau de Couperin" occupies the most tenuous position. It's in flux, yes, but uniquely, honoring the musical styles of earlier ages while leading the way forward in orchestration.

Happily, the performance underscores that sense of the fleeting. Principal oboist Frank Rosenwein and English hornist Robert Walters make limpid, vaporous contributions, while the rest of the orchestra under Bychkov holds a snappy pace and relishes the music's many harmonic twists.

As for impermanence, none of the three entries on the program explores the topic more directly or, in Bychkov's performance, more penetratingly, than Henri Dutilleux's "Metaboles," a 1957 commission from the orchestra, whose very goal is to depict continual transformation.

With Bychkov, its five brief movements are entirely seamless. Despite its use of patterns, the music ebbs and flows between gnawing calm, smooth lyricism, and bustling energy with no discernible gaps, resulting in an absorbing stream of effects: biting woodwinds, nuanced percussion, slithering strings.

At times, it's as if the sections are clambering over each other almost physically to reach the screaming finish. Virtuosity, meanwhile, is on display perpetually. Here is music the orchestra truly owns.

No less secure is the orchestra's possession of Schumann's Symphony No. 2. Not only does the score evoke the music directors past who promoted it but its journey through musical darkness into light, mirroring the composer's mental illness, also fits the evening's concept snugly.

Where the Dutilleux is essentially formless, the Schumann under Bychkov is notable for its structural elements. Latching on to the music's key rhythms, the conductor drives the orchestra like a sports car, demanding sharp turns, sudden accelerations, and a flexible pulse. Rubato, in fact, is his interpretive device of choice in the Scherzo.

The heart of the performance, though, is spread between the second two movements, where tension threatens constantly to overwhelm the robust good cheer. With Bychkov, that struggle is epic, and the Adagio that precedes it is a relentless, propulsive sweep, punctuated by hair-raising trills in the strings.