

Review**Cleveland Orchestra & Kent/Blossom Chamber Orchestra
with Jahja Ling, James Feddeck & Gil Shaham (July 28)**

by Nicholas Jones



It was a dark and stormy night—NOT! Saturday's welcome rainstorm passed through well before the Cleveland Orchestra's Blossom concert—but the music had enough storm and darkness, light and shadow, for any Gothic novel.

Saturday's Blossom program was a double-decker. The first hour featured the students of the Kent/Blossom Music Program, a summer training ground for some forty pre-professional musicians.

Conducted by James Feddeck with clarity and attention to detail, the group opened with Bartók's delicate *Romanian Folk Dances*. Some very nice solo playing by the clarinet, the piccolo, and violin went along with good ensemble work—crucial for these unassuming but highly demanding little pieces.

The music turned stormier when the Kent/Blossom students turned to the C minor symphony of Schubert (the 'Tragic' from 1816), written—appropriately for this group of young players—when the composer was nineteen. The performance was elegant and exciting, as the players caught the tragic fervor of the symphony. Even more important, they channeled Schubert's restless oscillations between heroic and lyrical, moving flexibly from the sharp and angular to the smooth and tender.

When the Cleveland Orchestra took the stage, the program turned to Beethoven—the Beethoven of the stormy middle period, about a decade earlier than the Schubert but in much the same vein. The opener was the *Coriolan* overture, Opus 62, from 1807. In C minor like the Schubert, this too combines the rough (big vertical leaps and recurring C minor chords—the angry warrior hero from Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*) and the tender (a lovely tune representing the pleas of Coriolanus' mother), bound together by a daring, restless insistent bass line in rapid eighth-notes, which I think of as the tragic struggles of the anxious mind, whether Coriolanus's or Beethoven's. Jahja Ling brought to the orchestra, which knows him so well, his usual exuberant love of the music. I loved in particular his ability to coax the orchestra into pianissimo when it was needed. The ending, with a long-held, barely heard dissonance (a cello A flat on a G chord) was poignantly beautiful.

Beethoven's violin concerto in D major (the only one he wrote) dates from the same period as the overture (and the Fifth Symphony, which was to follow in the program). In

contrast to those anxious pieces, Beethoven's concerto is marked by the most sublime gracefulness, though it is not without its shadows. The soloist was the extraordinary American violinist Gil Shaham, whose utter ease with the piece made it obvious that he knows it intimately, and yet he played every passage as if new, as if it delighted him to discover it as much as it delighted us to hear him play it. Complicated triplets, arpeggiated scales, octaves leaps—all the intricate ornamentation that Beethoven wrote out for his soloist—sounded so fresh that at moments I thought Shaham might be inventing the passagework on the spot. Ling led the opening movement at a brisk upbeat tempo, giving a lilting quality to its lovely, rising, D major theme. Shaham's tone is brilliantly focused, which allows him to play the quiet passages with an assured presence.

The delicate return of the main theme after the big first-movement cadenza, unadorned and barely accompanied, was transcendent in its simple beauty, as was the whisper-quiet duet between solo violin and bassoon just before the ending of the movement. The second movement combined a light and elegant touch with a sense of thoughtful, even prayerful contemplation. A lovely section featuring the orchestral strings delicately plucking, grounding the soloist's high, soft tune (Beethoven marks it 'perendosi' – 'let it die out'), reminded me of fireflies blinking up and down on a summer evening. The final rondo movement was full of vitality and joy. The performance felt like a once-in-a-lifetime experience: the applause after the first movement was warm and appropriate, and the standing ovation at the end was immediate and sustained.

After intermission, we were back to the stormy key of C minor for Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. The stage was full: Cleveland Orchestra members were sitting next to counterparts from the Kent/Blossom school. As a consequence, the sound was wonderfully full, a rich feast of acoustical nourishment that filled the pavilion and, I'm sure, the lawn as well. The young musicians—even the wind and horn players, in those difficult solo parts—played up to their standmates' expectations, and congratulations are deserved both by these hard-working students and by the musicians who coached and led them. Only in a few moments did some tuning problems enter in, particularly in some of the loudest chords. Otherwise, the performance was as exciting and fresh a rendition of the Fifth as anyone could have wished for. Fate knocked, the goblins walked across the universe, the heroes rode in, accompanied by the great C major fanfare music of the last movement — and, as with the concerto, it all seemed both familiar and totally new. That's the secret to great music-making, and it's obvious that Ling and the Clevelanders, and their younger colleagues at Kent/Blossom haven't forgotten it.

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Published on clevelandclassical.com July 31, 2012