

Cleveland Orchestra, guests capture the ineffable in sound at Severance Hall

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The Plain Dealer

Pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet, seen here in a file photo, was back at Severance Hall Thursday night performing James MacMillan's Piano Concerto No. 3 with the Cleveland Orchestra and conductor Stephane Deneve.

By [Zachary Lewis, The Plain Dealer](#)

CLEVELAND – It's one journey after another for the Cleveland Orchestra this spring.

Days after returning from its [2019 Asia Tour](#), the group Thursday night at Severance Hall embarked on a another quest, this one strictly musical in nature: to capture the ineffable in sound.

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It mostly succeeded. In four works conducted by Stephane Deneve, music director of the Brussels Philharmonic, the orchestra on its only subscription concert this month managed to conjure everything from tranquility and the meaning of life to ecstasy and religious awe. One score left a little to be desired, but the performances and the evening overall were fully rewarding.

The orchestra shone with particular brilliance on the lighter end of the spectrum, in Jennifer Higdon's "Blue Cathedral" and Debussy's "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun." Both saw the orchestra at peak elegance, playing with the refinement for which it is renowned.

Principal flutist Joshua Smith may have been the star of this "Prelude," the ethereal embodiment of the title creature, but he was not alone in perfection. His string and horn peers were also exceptional, notably first associate concertmaster Peter Otto.

"Blue Cathedral," a 1999 classic, was no less tantalizing. Playing the work for the first time, the orchestra with Deneve treated the composer's reflection on her then-late brother to a shimmering, evocative performance, one marked by organic pacing and a raft of instrumental color. Principal keyboardist Joela Jones conjured something timeless on the glockenspiel and assistant principal clarinetist Daniel McKelway was touching as the sound of Higdon's brother.

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It's not an easy piece to bring off, but Deneve and the orchestra did just that. Deneve again deferred to the music, allowing it to unfold naturally and continuously. Each twist, surge, and retreat flowed seamlessly into the next, and the crescendo at work's end accrued cataclysmic power from a gradual rise.

The conductor also couldn't have asked for finer forces. Strings, percussion, and a trumpet section led by principal Michael Sachs; If any were still jet-lagged, they did not show it.

A second contemporary work, James MacMillan's Piano Concerto No. 3, rounded out the evening in spectacular if not entirely fulfilling fashion. Based on the structure of the Roman Catholic rosary, the concerto, subtitled "The Mysteries of Light," posed the orchestra, audience, and pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet with endless variety and challenge but also fell short of what would seem to have been the primary mark.

Comments from the stage by Deneve and Thibaudet went a long way toward promoting understanding of the piece and the Biblical events behind it. The music itself, however, struck this listener as out of alignment, largely frenetic, brash, and rhythmic when the moments being depicted, miraculous as they are, begged for lyrical or contemplative treatment.

Still, there's no denying a dazzling performance like the one Thibaudet gave, and MacMillan was often right on the emotional target. The tinkling high notes against a slow melody in "Proclamatio Regni Dei" were simply transfixing, and the combination of bells and piano in the fourth movement was enough to induce chills.

One encouraging side note: "The Mysteries of Light" is on a journey of its own. Completed in 2008, the concerto already has seen nearly 40 performances. In a world of disappearances after world premieres, that's a record worth celebrating.

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What: Stephane Deneve conducts Higdon, MacMillan, Debussy, and Scriabin

When: 8 p.m. Saturday, April 27.

Where: Severance Hall, 11001 Euclid Ave., Cleveland.

Tickets: \$41-\$165. Go to clevelandorchestra.com or call 216-231-1111.

