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Pushing Boundaries

The Cleveland Orchestra had a performance on October 2nd, 2009 a Severance Hall. The program included Symphony Number 85 (“La Reine”) by Joseph Haydn, Prelude and Love-Death from *Tristan and Isolde*, by Richard Wagner and Symphony Number 5 in D minor, Opus 47 by Dmitri Shostakovich. This evening’s performance was interesting. The theme was “Artistic Renewal” . The chosen pieces were from already successful composers, yet these pieces introduced new artistic creativity. The composer selections span a range from Haydn in 1732-1809, Wagner in 1813-1883, and Shostakovich in 1906-1975. This concert provides a look back to almost 300 years of history and music making. Also interesting was two symphonies were featured when it is more typical to only feature one.

The three featured composers all pushed themselves to create new works outside of their comfort zone, when they easily could have enjoyed the fruits of their successes. In Haydn’s case, he could have easily stayed in Vienna at the Esterházy palace. But instead he took the opportunity to accept a commission in Paris. With a different audience and resources available, he was able to think differently about the works he composed, tailoring his pieces for his new audience. One of which was Symphony Number 85. To pay homage to his French audience, the first movement starts out slow, “much like a French-style overture” . Another tribute to the French can be found in the second movement. Here, he basis the theme from a French folksong, “La gentile et jeune Lisette” (“The Noble Womand and Young Lisette”) .

For Wagner, he had been working on an opera. His “artistic instincts” told him to set aside his current work to work on *Tristan and Isolde*, “inspired by philosophical and personal obsessions” . Wagner, while composing the *Ring*, was studying philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. His study cast the characters in the *Ring* in a different light which he felt he had to explore in a new set of works. Also at this time, he was developing feelings for Mathilde Wesendonck, a young wife of the patron who was supporting Wagner . The passion in the music is thought to be because Wagner was in love with Mathilde, and this piece was his outlet. Although some think he needed love to complete *Tristan and Isolde*.

Shostakovich’s inspiration was based on the Stalin’s dislike for his *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* (May 73). Fortunately, he didn’t head off to the gulag and was able to compose Symphony Number 5. He had composed a fourth symphony, but he considered it too experimental . Shostakovich could have easily changed his style to suit the tastes of the Soviet Union. He decided instead to continue on in his own style, although with care as not to end up in the gulag.

It is rare to have a performance with two symphonies. A symphony can be a complex and long piece and having more than one in a concert program can be overwhelming for the listener. This evening, the orchestra played Haydn’s Symphony Number 85 and Shostakovich’s Symphony Number 5. A typical symphony includes “tonal works in four movements” . The four movements usually vary in tempo (or speed) the movement is played in. For example, the four movements might be in a pattern such as; slow, fast, slow, and fast. How did the orchestra get away with it this evening? Haydn’s symphonies do not conform to the classical model of a symphony . In contrast, Shostakovich’s symphonies tend to follow the classical model of a symphony.

Overall, it was an excellent concert. The pieces performed were excellent. I thought they went well together. Haydn’s was light and enjoyable while Wagner had passion. Shostakovich’s felt dark and with a hint of Soviet pride mixed in. Severance Hall was also amazing, with excellent acoustics. For example, even though we were a bit up and back in the balcony, I swear we could hear the page being turned by one of the percussionists, all the way in the back of the orchestra. The Cleveland Orchestra performed not just with precision with everyone in playing the right notes at the right time, but with feeling and passion. Parts that required playing softly were played so softly, it was like a whisper, yet the acoustics allowed the audience to clearly hear these whispers. At the end, just about everyone gave the orchestra a standing ovation, and was rewarded with an encore. I was not able to get the name of the encore, but it was a very light and happy sounding piece which again was a nice contrast to the Shostakovich’s symphony. Overall, it was an excellent performance at an excellent hall. My wife and mom enjoyed it too.

# Bibliography

May, Thomas. "Artistic Renewal." The Cleveland Orchestra 0910 Season October 2009: 63.

Symphony - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. 26 October 2009 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony>.