

Drew Carey delights in Cleveland Orchestra's 'Midsummer Night's Dream' at Blossom

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Joshua Gunter/The Plain Dealer Drew

Carey in rehearsal with the Cleveland Orchestra last week for performances of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" at Blossom Music Center.

Drew Carey wasn't making it up. As he played a man playing a woman Saturday at Blossom Music Center, the Cleveland-born host of TV's "The Price is Right" recited lofty lines, stabbed himself with an imaginary sword and collapsed onto the podium.

The evening's sporting guest conductor, Nicholas McGegan, gave a mock flinch and proceeded. Carey remained dead, at least for the moment. The comedian's pratfall was part of his gig as narrator of Felix Mendelssohn's incidental music to Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream," the major work on Saturday's Cleveland Orchestra program. Carey, in his debut with his hometown ensemble, was an engaging presence, beaming widely, savoring the sonic magic around him and doing his game best in thespian matters.

REVIEW

Cleveland Orchestra

Blossom Music Center, Cuyahoga Falls
Saturday and Sunday, July 26 and 27

It was a partial success. For most of the performance, Carey's rapid-fire delivery of the text fell short of promoting Shakespearean intelligibility. Only when he became Flute enacting the female role of the suicidal Thisbe did he settle down, wrap his lips crisply around words and convey the language's richness.

Carey stuck closely to the script until the orchestra's regal account of the "Wedding March" inspired an ad-lib: "That's like my cousin's wedding."

The concert had something of a Shakespearean thread. Along with "Midsummer," McGegan led Carl Maria von Weber's "Oberon" overture, Arthur Foote's "A Night Piece" (for flute and strings) and Arthur Sullivan's "Masquerade Suite" from "The Merchant of Venice." When Mendelssohn and Weber weren't center stage,

interest sagged.

But the performances did each work ample honor. The "Oberon" overture benefited from Richard King's moonlit horn solo and the strings' gossamer precision. McGegan paid close heed both to ethereal and exuberant spirits.

The same could be said for the "Midsummer" excerpts, including a reading of the overture that tripped with light joy. It remains one of the wonders of music that Mendelssohn wrote the overture at the age of 17 (and the rest 15 years later).

The orchestra and McGegan -- who stomped boisterously during the overture's hee-haws -- were vibrant advocates for Mendelssohn. Hornist King again proved a poetic alchemist in the "Nocturne," the winds were nimble, the strings glowing, the brasses noble.

The languorous lines of Foote's "A Night Piece" had a mellifluous champion in Joshua Smith, the orchestra's principal flute, though the music's modest charm almost was drenched by a downpour that arrived toward the end (sending listeners on the lawn beneath umbrellas and blankets). Sullivan's "Merchant of Venice" music is enjoyable, if a sign that the composer did his finest work when allied to the words of W.S. Gilbert.

McGegan, who is especially admired as a specialist in music before 1800, was back with about half the orchestra for Sunday's program, a menu of Baroque and Classical morsels in major keys.

The conductor served as droll host, sharing juicy musicological details (he called Venice "the Las Vegas of 18th-century Europe") and assuring the audience, as if it were necessary, that the Cleveland Orchestra plays the theme from "Masterpiece Theatre" (Jean-Joseph Mouret's Fanfare-Rondeau) better than the band heard on PBS.

Along with Mouret, the program contained works with short movements, many of them dance-inspired, by Vivaldi, Haydn, Handel and Jean-Marie Leclair, who was murdered by an unknown assailant. An entrancing suite from the latter's only opera, "Scylla and Glaucus," suggested the music world's loss. The oboe solo in the lilting "Sicilienne" received lovely shaping by Jeffrey Rathbun.

McGegan was a welcome Energizer Bunny, bringing rhythmic zest to all things Baroque and otherwise. Vivaldi's Concerto for String Orchestra abounded in stylish vitality, and orchestra members Michael Sachs and Jack Sutte were impeccable soloists in the composer's Concerto for Two Trumpets in C major.

The evening's two eminent H's also provided pleasure. Haydn shows his sly side in the Symphony No. 30, which is subtitled "Alleluja" for the subtle use of a sacred theme. Handel is at a festive peak in his "Water Music," whose movements from the second and third suites the orchestra and McGegan gave sturdy, buoyant performances, with no signs of aquatic turbulence.

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