

# Reviews

110 CDs, Books & DVDs rated by expert critics

## Welcome



Much of the world's music-making continues to be on ice and nowhere is that felt more keenly than in the US where, just recently, the

Nashville Symphony announced it was suspending operations for a year. It's bittersweet, then, to have them in the Orchestral section this month with a five-star performance of music by the late Christopher Rouse. They are joined by the Cleveland Orchestra, which scores a Recording of the Month (see right); the release is a great showcase for the quality of musicianship to be found across the Atlantic.

The American flavour continues elsewhere with a Concerto Choice by John Adams, a new opera by David Lang and appearances by Elliott Carter, Samuel Barber and Aaron Copland.

Michael Beek *Reviews Editor*

### This month's critics

John Allison, Nicholas Anderson, Michael Beek, Terry Blain, Kate Bolton-Porciatti, Gary Booth, Geoff Brown, Anthony Burton, Michael Church, Christopher Cook, Martin Cotton, Christopher Dingle, Misha Donat, Jessica Duchon, George Hall, Malcolm Hayes, Julian Haylock, Claire Jackson, Daniel Jaffé, Berta Joncus, Erik Levi, Natasha Loges, Andrew McGregor, David Nice, Roger Nichols, Bayan Northcott, Steph Power, Anthony Pryer, Paul Riley, Jan Smaczny, Michael Tanner, Sarah Urwin Jones, Kate Wakeling, Alexandra Wilson

#### KEY TO STAR RATINGS

★★★★★ Outstanding  
★★★★ Excellent  
★★★ Good  
★★ Disappointing  
★ Poor

### RECORDING OF THE MONTH

## A Cleveland Orchestra celebration to behold

The American ensemble honours its past and looks to the future with this mighty three-disc debut release, says *Terry Blain*



### A New Century

**Beethoven:** String Quartet No. 15 in A minor, Op. 132 (arr. Orchestra); **R. Strauss:** Aus Italien, Op. 16; **Varèse:** Amériques; **Johannes Maria Staud:** Stromab; **Bernd Richard Deutsch:** Okeanos\*; **Prokofiev:** Symphony No. 3 in C minor, Op. 44  
\*Paul Jacobs (organ); Cleveland Orchestra/Franz Welser-Möst  
*Cleveland Orchestra TCO0001 188:00 mins (3 discs)*

Recorded live across a two-year period, this handsomely packaged set (with historical essays and notes on the music), provides a snapshot of the Cleveland Orchestra around its centenary in 2018, and is the first release on its new label.

All six performances are conducted by the orchestra's music director Franz Welser-Möst, who has been in Cleveland since 2002 and recently signed a contract extension until 2027. Overall, they paint a picture of sovereign technical command, with an upholstered warmth of tone not automatically in the DNA of American orchestras.

Both traits are evident in the richly nuanced account of Beethoven's Op. 132 String Quartet on disc one, performed by the full Cleveland string section. The unanimity of attack and accent are unfaltering, but it's the expressive insight of the playing which is really striking. Both are evident in the opening *Adagio sostenuto* movement, where Welser-Möst's addition of double basses shadowing the cellos an octave lower adds an extra notch of brooding intensity to the music.

The coupling is Varèse's teeming *Amériques*, where the raw excitement of the playing never degenerates to shapeless cacophony. Disc two brings another percussion-heavy



Premiere pairing: Paul Jacobs (organ) and the Cleveland Orchestra perform *Okeanos*

work, the Austrian composer Johannes Maria Staud's 2017 piece *Stromab* (Downstream). Based on a short story by English writer Algernon Blackwood, it charts a canoe trip down the Danube into a macabre heart of darkness, and receives a rivetingly precise, atmospheric performance.

An effulgent traversal of *Aus Italien* blows the shadows away, highlighting Welser-Möst's considerable Straussian credentials. The diaphanous textures of 'Am Strande von Sorrent' are ravishingly sifted, and even the joshing with 'Funiculi, Funiculà' in the finale, which can be irritating, is made light-heartedly enjoyable.

Disc three pairs the US premiere of Cleveland Young Composer Fellow Bernd

Richard Deutsch's roiling organ concerto *Okeanos*, with Paul Jacobs a dazzling soloist, and a gripping, stunningly played Prokofiev Third Symphony. It's a piece with a reputation for rowdiness and dissonance, but

### The players have a warmth of tone not automatically in the DNA of US orchestras

the Cleveland's refined, nuanced playing makes it more than that. The *Andante*, while dark-hued, is full of exquisitely etched detail, while the rushing strings in the *Scherzo* are tinglingly febrile without grating over-insistently on the senses.

The sound on all three discs is outstandingly well balanced

and transparent, reflecting the exceptional acoustic of the orchestra's Severance Hall headquarters. Audience noise is virtually non-existent, and there is no applause at the end of performances, which have the polish of studio recordings.

The Cleveland Orchestra has always been a by-word for the forensic exactitude of its players, and you can still hear that in the many recordings they made with the famously disciplinarian Georg Szell, and later with Lorin Maazel and Christoph von Dohnányi. But the empathy and expressive latitude Welser-Möst has added actually make you wonder if the orchestra has ever sounded better.

**PERFORMANCE** ★★★★★  
**RECORDING** ★★★★★

### An interview with Franz Welser-Möst



#### Why pair recent commissions with classic repertoire?

Cleveland actually plays more contemporary music than a lot of other orchestras and we wanted to give a glimpse of what we do throughout the season. These are pieces we really believe in and which we've enjoyed playing. You don't have to play the same stuff over and over again; there's so much great music, and if you play it on a level like this orchestra does, it's compelling and enjoyable. That's the message of the three discs.

#### It must have been tough to choose what to put on them?

Yes it was, because every time we talked about it we would think of things we'd have to miss out. We're sitting on tons of recordings, actually, because we record everything for our archives. Since we improved the quality of our recordings, there is a lot of stuff we've thought would be great to put out.

#### Hence the new label...

We looked at what other orchestras do – like the London Symphony and others – and we felt it was the right way to go. We have control over what we are putting out there; otherwise, you can run into compromises which you don't want to make, plus we can do things on our terms.

#### What are your hopes for Cleveland's next century?

When we approached the centenary I said we should come up with a vision for our community first. So it is that in 100 years, every child in Cleveland should be touched by music. That's a huge goal, but 20 per cent of our audience is under 25 and that makes us optimistic that we are at least going in the right direction.