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.

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 unflagging, but it's the expressive insight of the playing which is really striking. The coupling is Varèse's 'Amériques'.

A New Century


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.

The Cleveland Orchestra

Franz Welser-Möst

The American flavour continues elsewhere with a Concerto Choice by Elliott Carter, across the Atlantic. The sound on all three discs is outstandingly well balanced and transparent, reflecting the exceptional acoustics of the orchestra's Severance Hall headquarters. Audience noise is virtually non-existent, and the exceptional acoustic of Severance Hall is a by-word for high-quality recordings, actually, because 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 discipline-oriented Georg Solti, and later with Lorin Maazel and Christoph von Dohnányi. But the empathy and expressive polish of studio recordings.

The Players have a warm heart of tone not automatically in the DNA of US orchestras

The Cleveland Orchestra's refined, nuanced playing makes it more than that. The American, 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 acoustics of the orchestra's Severance Hall headquarters.

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 in a fresh way then 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 didn’t want 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.

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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 complications which you don’t want to make, plus we can do things in our own way.

What are your hopes for Cleveland’s next century?

When we approached the 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.