

## Concert report **Backstage tour precedes a delightful Orchestra evening at Blossom**

by Daniel Hathaway

The Cleveland Orchestra graciously invited area music journalists to 'Media Night' at Blossom last Saturday, a day which began with storm clouds and steadily improved into a perfect July evening. A gaggle of ten of us, plus guests, assembled for a fascinating behind-the-scenes tour an hour before concert time.

After trooping backstage past principal violist Robert Vernon, who was just opening his case and about to put on his tie, communications director Ana Papakhian introduced us to stage manager Joe Short and orchestra operations manager Amy Gill. Joe noted that a big changeover had taken place earlier that day. On Friday night, Lynard Skynard had opened for a Kid Rock concert, and besides packing up both of those acts afterwards in multiple semi's, the grounds crew had a lot of tidying up to do once the fans had departed.

While the Blossom crew was busy at their end of things on Saturday morning, Joe and his team were loading trucks at Severance Hall to bring all the necessary gear down to Blossom for the 3:30 orchestra rehearsal.

Taking a symphony orchestra on the road — or even moving it from University Circle to Cuyahoga Falls — is a complicated business. While a lot of the musicians travel with their own instruments, larger items like double basses and percussion instruments get special treatment. A few years ago, Joe told us, the orchestra had special trunks created for members of the bass section that hold instruments, concert clothes and whatnot, and get air freighted from special shipping facilities in the US to a few ports of entry in Europe. Smaller, two-to-a-trunk units serve to move the non-instrumental gear of other players.

The move from a temperature controlled concert hall to the great semi-outdoors is also fraught with complications. Blossom's resident grand piano, rented annually from Steinway in New York, lives in a special backstage shed with a dehumidifier, and

requires more frequent tuning than one would that stays indoors. Special air conditioning at the edge of the stage helps control onstage humidity and every music stand is supplied with wind clips so the music will stay put. And then there are the critters. The piano soloist noted after the concerto that he had been sharing the keys with bugs, and we heard that a mouse fell out of the rafters during a recent rehearsal.

As one might expect, there are individual dressing rooms for the maestro du jour, the concertmaster (Peter Otto took the driver's seat tonight) and soloists (Simon Trpceski had a 7' piano for his pre-game warmup). There's also a large 'Chorus Room' with built-in risers (plus pinball machines, video games and food-warming facilities), a patio with barbecue grills and a basketball hoop and various hangout spots for performers who stick around between the end of rehearsal at 6 and the 8 o'clock concert.

Those players, by the way, don't spend all their time in the practice room. Amy noted that some actually bicycle down from Cleveland and others make use of the great outdoor facilities that Blossom offers. One of the orchestra's hornists was just finishing a sandwich after a rollerblading session on the access roads.

We also momentarily interrupted the important work of one of the orchestra's librarians, who besides ordering, distributing and collecting the orchestra's printed music, spend hours marking bowings into players' music after those bowings are determined by section principals.

The evening's concert was to feature two young artists, French conductor Lionel Bringuier (right, currently associate conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic) and Macedonian pianist Simon Trpceski (left) who was set to tackle Rachmaninoff's second concerto. Both were making their Cleveland Orchestra debuts. The Pavilion was filling up nicely by the time we took our seats but even a large crowd looks a bit thin in the hugeness of an auditorium with 5,700 seats!

Bringuier chose one of Franz Liszt's 'Mephisto' Waltzes to begin the program. No. 1 sets the Devil's machinations in the village tavern, and established Bringuier as an energetic leader who lays out the

broad landscape of the piece but leaves many of the details to the skill of the players.

His tendency to pump up orchestra sound led to some imbalances in the Rachmaninoff. Simon Trpceski was working hard at his difficult solo part, but was frequently engulfed in brass when the piano was meant to come to the fore rather than be enmeshed in the orchestral sound. Trpceski has loads of technique, musicality and good taste, and the good taste part of the equation led to an admirably understated performance of a work that can become a vehicle for ostentatious display. We were glad to hear him say at intermission that he had set out to achieve a 'natural-sounding' account of the concerto. The audience, apparently appreciating this approach, gave him a standing ovation.

After intermission, Bringuier returned to lead Ravel's brilliantly conceived orchestration of Mussorgsky's 'Pictures at an Exhibition'. A bit over-conducted in places (are two hands really necessary for the opening trumpet solo?) and a bit under-controlled in others (the ballet of chicks in their shells needed a little tighter hand on the reins), 'Pictures' made the splendid impression it always does in the hands of a great orchestra, even if the conductor on this occasion sometimes pushed the brass toward edginess.

Summer is a great time of year, and Blossom is a great opportunity to put new, young talent on stage and see what they can do. Trpceski and Bringuier are both performers to keep an ear on in the future.