

The View from Usher Hall, Edinburgh

[caption id="attachment_7586" align="aligncenter" width="600" caption="Franz Welser-Möst"]



[/caption] Our first Edinburgh Festival and our first visit to [Usher Hall](#) opened with a delightful surprise. We didn't have to get very far into Mozart's *Idomeneo* for me to realize that the acoustics of the hall are surpassingly beautiful. The Scottish Chamber Orchestra, playing period instruments, and the singers floated in a warm acoustic atmosphere, but the sound was also direct and present, so that the attacks of strings and brass and the fleeting colors of the human voice were as clear as you could want them to be. Our seats were also several rows in the Grand Circle and well covered by the level above. In most halls the sound becomes rather muffled in that kind of situation, but, when I noticed that I was surrounded by fellow critics, I assumed that the Festival media representatives knew what they were doing. More importantly, I loved what I heard. Years ago I used to pore over Leo Beranek's *Music, Acoustics, and Architecture* in its first edition (1962), and later I neglected to seek out any of the updated editions, most recently (2004) extensively revised and retitled [Concert Halls and Opera Houses: Music, Acoustics, and Architecture](#). Beranek gave Usher Hall a fairly lacklustre evaluation, based on his own impressions and a survey of musicians and listeners who knew the hall, which they considered somewhat unresponsive and dull. Soloists and orchestral musicians found it necessary to force the sound to make themselves heard. As it happened Usher underwent a £9m renovation in the late 1990's, following the fall of some plaster from the ceiling, and this is the magnificent result.

In the 2004 edition, Beranek calls Usher Hall's appearance "awe-inspiring," its red fabrics and gold ornaments "leav[ing] one convinced that an exciting performance is to follow." The acoustic miracle, he says, is due to a significant increase in reverberation time from 1.5 seconds to 1.7, in the middle frequencies with a full house — all accomplished by removing some carpeted areas and the installation of seats that are slightly harder than before. This glowing but immediate sound continued to impress me in the Kronos Quartet's evening, which involved a extensive electronic manipulation, as well as The Sixteen's performance of Purcell's *Indian Queen*. Even with the new glass shell at one side, the corridors and bars are still a bit cramped, but the walls are decorated with superb oils by twentieth century Scottish painters, mostly on loan from the [City Art Centre's](#) distinguished collection. Among the artists are Sir William Gillies, John Maxwell, Leon Morrocco, Victoria Crowe and William Stewart MacGeorge. These attracted a good deal of interest and aroused lively discussion during the intervals. I was delighted by their strength and variety. Scottish art deserves much more international recognition than it has received. What a pity I couldn't get to Edinburgh in time to hear the Cleveland Orchestra, which must have sounded splendid. I was especially keen to hear them at the Festival, since I was thrilled with their last concert at Carnegie Hall, which I have not yet discussed in the Review. On that occasion Music Director Franz Welser-Möst led them in Beethoven's Coriolan Overture, Berg's Lulu Suite, and Beethoven's Eroica Symphony. Their sound has become even darker and more Viennese than it was under Dohnányi, and Franz Welser-Möst can produce a wonderful variety of attacks from the strings, combining the more aggressive American style with Central European *sfumato*. I missed the earlier part of his career (when I was living in Cleveland!), and I have no idea why he aroused so much controversy. He is a musician of particular subtlety, sometimes given to understatement and sometimes working up considerable intensity with Furtwänglerian tempo fluctuations and expressiveness. His performances give one the impression of spontaneity and a sense of grasping the mood in the room as well as his own. Perhaps not everybody can understand this. While the Coriolan Overture, although exciting, noble, and successful, seemed a trifle arbitrary in places, the Lulu Suite seemed close to perfect. The music flowed naturally over the course of the entire work, and it was clear how tightly knit the structure was and how closely it followed the symmetry of the opera. We could really sense its transition into retrograde as Lulu begins her descent. The virtuosic playing, tenebrous Viennese elegance, and bite in the orchestra's sound proved a perfect vehicle for Berg's imaginings, and Erin Wall sang with both dreamy sensuality and aggression, always keeping up the integrity of the melodic line. It was too bad that she sat out the orchestral sections with a peevish scowl that made her look more like Lulu's disapproving, virtuous sister. The Eroica really brought out this contrast between an understated presentation of the music and passionate excursions. It was a highly individual reading of one of the composer's most revolutionary works — and a powerful one. I found W-M's reading both fascinating and deeply moving. The audience received it with lengthy and rapturous applause. If Welser-Möst and his orchestra are not appreciated in the invidious town on Lake Erie, they would surely be most welcome in New York — and in the UK as well, to judge by the enthusiastic notices in the British press. And back to Edinburgh, where there are many musical and theatrical glories to recount, as well as some embarrassments, but the exceptional thing about Edinburgh is that the International Festival and the Fringe combine to make the event feel like a laboratory which stimulates the audience either into pursuing their own creative work or at least into some form of participation. But more of that later, including my own invasion of the stage...