

Preview

**Cleveland Orchestra to premiere
Sean Shepherd's *Tuolumne* this week**

by Mike Telin



"*Tuolumne* is really the piece of my life so far," says Sean Shepherd, the Daniel R. Lewis Composer Fellow of the Cleveland Orchestra. Beginning on Thursday, April 18 in Severance Hall, Franz Welser-Möst will lead The Cleveland Orchestra in the world premiere of Shepherd's mammoth score. The concerts also include Shostakovich's *Violin Concerto No. 1* with Frank Peter Zimmermann as soloist and Dvorak's *Symphony No. 6*.

Sean Shepherd is a fast-rising star in the field of contemporary concert music. Recent premieres include *Blue Blazes*, a Hechinger Commission from Christoph Eschenbach and the National Symphony Orchestra, *Quartet for Oboe and Strings* at the

Santa Fe and La Jolla summer festivals in 2011, and a work for the Claremont Trio in celebration of the opening of Calderwood Hall at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. From 2010 to 2012 Shepherd served as the first-ever Composer-in-Residence of the Reno Philharmonic, his hometown, and in 2012 Susanna Mälkki, premiered Shepherd's Ensemble Intercontemporain-commissioned *Blur* in Paris and Cologne.

In his program notes, Shepherd writes, "*Tuolumne* ('two ALL um knee' or, as some California locals say it, 'two ALL 'o me'), from the Native American language of Miwok, is a word of unclear meaning, but is often thought to describe the small group of indigenous people who lived in what is now known as Yosemite National Park.

Shepherd was inspired by the photographs of Ansel Adams and each movement corresponds to a different image: *Untitled (Water over Rock)*, *Winter Sunrise*, and *Merced Lake Country*. We spoke to the thoroughly engaging Sean Shepherd by telephone.

Mike Telin: Thanks so much for taking the time. I've been looking forward to this conversation ever since watching your great interview on [SoundNotion](#).

Sean Shepherd: You saw that. That was a lot of fun.

MT: It was and I learned a lot. First, congratulations on all of your successes. You're winding down the Daniel R. Lewis position and adding the Kravis Emerging Composer

with the New York Philharmonic. And I understand you're writing a piece for Carnegie Hall's newly established National Youth Orchestra of the United States.

SS: it's very nice, there's no other way to describe it. Actually I'm working on the youth orchestra piece at this moment. It's exciting because it's so different from writing these mammoth pieces, the Tolkien twin towers with Cleveland and New York. They are big serious and very personal pieces. But writing for an orchestra made up of 16- to 19-year olds is fun. It's sort of my Russian overture that will be on a program with the Tchaikovsky violin concerto and Shostakovich 10. The kids are already friending me on Facebook and it's just a lot of fun. So I'm really looking forward to it.

MT: That's great. Not many composers can say they have an entire youth orchestra following them on Facebook.

SS: [laughing] That's very true, and I have to make it worth their while. But I am just so happy to be able to write for these three interesting groups. It's kind of even beyond excitement.

I've always felt so honored to be associated with Cleveland because they have such a special sound and work ethic. It has been great to be part of that family and I think that is the word to use for this orchestra.

When I wrote *Wanderlust*, my first piece for them, I of course knew their sound, but this time is a lot more personal. And I put a lot of pressure on myself because I wanted the piece to be the perfect musical message for which they would be the perfect megaphone.

MT: Did you have any restrictions regarding instrumentation etc?

SS: No, none. I had a conversation with Franz Wesler-Most and he said, what do you want to do? Which is an amazing question to come from a conductor. Very often it's "this is what you're doing and these are the other pieces on the program." While I've never had a bad conversation, this one was the other way around. I've actually never heard of this outside of Cleveland. It was a very special invitation.

MT: But it is written for a very large orchestra.

SS: I do use an enormous orchestra. I later found out that Kaija Saariaho in her piece *Orion* that she wrote for Cleveland, and Birtwistle's *Night's Black Bird*, are almost the same instrumentation. I guess everyone goes for the large orchestra when writing for Cleveland. I did struggle with writing *Tuolumne* for months and I had to rise to the challenge but art isn't necessarily meant to be easy and I do look forward to the performances.

MT: How did you decide on the Ansel Adams photos?

SS: Ansel Adams is an artist with whom I had wanted to interact with forever but I think I was saving it for the right moment. When I spoke to Franz about it, he was interested because one of the things that is a real parallel [between Adams and The Cleveland Orches-

tra] is the purity. I've never seen a blurry photograph by Adams. And there is a real boldness to his photography. There's an austerity, and there isn't anything that is extraneous in his images.

MT: I understand what you're saying about the relationship between the purity of Adam's images and the purity of the Cleveland sound. I take it the photos are not going to be projected during the performance?

SS: There are some issues regarding rights when it comes to putting them in the program book. But, I will talk about them in the pre-concert talk so there will be ways for people to see them. I also describe them in the program notes.

But when we were discussing this it did bring up the issue of whether or not it was possible to hear the music without the photos and I absolutely think that is possible. And, I did intend for the piece to stand on its own.

We also talked about projecting them over the orchestra, but then it would become pictorial and people will start looking for direct connections and that is not what this piece is about.

MT: Actually I'm never quite sure what to make of the performances of pieces like Chris and Dave Brubeck's "Ansel Adams: America," or "The Planets" where NASA images are projected.

SS: I know and I wonder what Holst would think. Maybe he'd be fascinated because so many things have happened in terms of what we can see in the planets since the piece was written. I'm not saying that it shouldn't be done and someday if someone programs *Tuolumne* and wanted to include the photos, if they wanted to take care of everything it would be fine with me.

MT: I really am of two minds about this, but I don't always feel the need to look at a visual in order to have images appear in my brain.

SS: Me too and besides, the orchestra is spectacle enough.

MT: Do you have a routine or process that you use when composing?

SS: It's been honed over a period of time, but it is essentially in two parts. There's the ear part where I will sit at a keyboard and bang out the notes and sounds that I want to achieve. Then, and it's almost like a different job, but I go to the computer and begin to notate. I do have the pencil behind the ear thing too and if I ever get stuck, the only thing that I know that I can fully trust is my ear. So I guess I am kind of puritan. I do cut out the middle man so to speak in that I don't write out the score with pencil and then put in on the computer. But I do have my own shorthand.

I also compose from beginning to end, although I have had a few that I started in the middle, but I found that when I went to the beginning I had a hard time. It works best for me if I know that one thing is coming after the next.

But I always start with a big shape in mind and for *Tuolumne* it was the same. The piece starts small and ends small and there are big arches, and crescendo and de-crescendo hairpins. The second movement starts soft and is one big crescendo and the third movement begins with a loud crash, and that was the design of the piece. I like to think in terms of movements but I also like to think about the form [of the entire piece] which is larger than the movements themselves.

With *Tuolumne* I was also working with a twenty- to twenty-five minute time frame, which is a lot. It's one thing to bore someone for four minutes but it's another to bore them for hours.

I do worry more about pacing more than I used to, because the right sound at the wrong time is the wrong sound. I tweeted this while writing one of the large sections of *Tuolumne*. I said "it's really hard to see the forest for the trees when your job is to draw the trees." But when writing a big orchestral work you can often get lost in the details. I'd like to think I can get the elephant to dance on one toe but very often it's happy just walking.

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