

Preview

Cleveland Orchestra Family Concert: a chat with guest conductor Michael Butterman

by Mike Telin



If you're looking for a fun way to spend the afternoon on a family outing with Mom this weekend what could be better taking in a Cleveland Orchestra Family Concert? On Sunday, May 12 beginning at 2:00 pm conductor Michael Butterman makes a return visit to Severance Hall with his own program titled *Fables, Fantasies and Folklore*.

During the concert, audience members will be invited to create their own musical story. "It's really just an exploration of narrative and music, [basically] how composers develop a sense of character, setting and plot," says Maestro Butterman.

Recognized for his commitment to creative artistry, innovative programming, and audience and community engagement, Michael Butterman serves as music director for both the Boulder Philharmonic and the Shreveport Symphony and is resident conductor of the Jacksonville Symphony. And for thirteen seasons he has held the position as Principal Conductor for Education and Outreach for the Rochester Philharmonic, the first position of its kind in the United States.

Butterman created *Fables, Fantasies and Folklore* in Rochester and he describes the concert as something that works very well for elementary age kids who are thinking about their own creative writing, and studying English language arts. But, he points out, "we are also doing it on Mother's Day which is about parents and kids having a good time. I think the concert works on a couple different levels; educational of course, but I think there is also enough of an element of fun that it can be very highly entertaining."

Fables, Fantasies and Folklore includes some of the world's most popular programmatic music such as Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*, Grieg's *In the hall of the mountain king*, Rossini's *William Tell Overture* and Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*. Speaking by telephone, we asked Michael Butterman to talk about the thread that ties the music together and how he will go about creating a story with the audience?

Michael Butterman: I suppose it is the building blocks of stories, the elements of character, setting and plot. But what we learn during the concert is how composers use compositional techniques to convey a sense of these story elements. For example in

Scheherazade, we'll hear Scheherazade's theme played by the solo violin, which has a certain quality to it because of its range. We'll contrast that with the Sultan's theme, which is much more aggressive and in a minor key, and played by the [lower sounding] instruments. Then we conclude that through a range of pitches and instrumental timbres composers can give us a sense of how to feel about a particular character.

Creating the story: Element I - Character

On Sunday we'll have a cellist and an oboist who have volunteered to come to the front of the stage and play something characteristic on their instrument, and I don't know exactly what it will be. Then I'll ask the audience what kind of characters that music made them think of. Then I'll say that we know that our story has two characters, for example a duck and a grumpy old man.

Element II – Setting

I'll talk about how composers give us a sense of setting, whether it's through the use of rhythm or instruments that remind one of a particular country or sometimes just a mood. For example, we'll play the middle section of the *William Tell Overture*, the part that has a very calm feeling which suggests nature or a meadow. We'll also play a little bit of the *Mambo* section of *West Side Story*, which has a high energy, Latin feel.

Then the orchestra will play an eight bar vamp, which will be the setting for our musical story. And I'll go into the audience and ask them what they think it sounds like, whether it suggests a country or being on a ranch in the middle of Texas.

Element III – Plot

Finally we need to figure out what happens in our story. To do that I'll talk about how composers will either imitate the sounds of a real life event or change the style of music they are writing to indicate that something is happening. For this the musical example is the *Moldau*, which as you know has different episodes as the river runs through the country and around each bend we come across a different scene.

The fun really begins when the oboist and cellist come back to the front of the stage and I'll say we have a duck and a grumpy old man and we know they are on a ranch in Texas, but what's going to happen in our story? Then each musician will improvise something and after about a minute I'll stop and ask the audience [what they think is happening] in our story. Depending on how rich the answers are I may ask for a conclusion or I might suggest one myself. Finally we'll try to perform this more or less improvised story.

There is a large element of spontaneity, and it can be very funny and surprising, but it is sort of like working without a net because you really don't know what you are in for. It keeps me on my toes — it's always successful and never dull.

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