

## Preview

### **Barber's cello concerto at Blossom: a chat with Cleveland Orchestra soloist Mark Kosower**

by Mike Telin



For reasons unknown, Samuel Barber's *Cello Concerto in A minor* has never garnered the attention that is enjoyed by the composer's violin concerto. But on Sunday, August 4 beginning at 7:00 pm at Blossom Music Center, Cleveland Orchestra principal cellist Mark Kosower hopes to do his part in changing that when he performs the Cleveland Orchestra premiere of the work. The concert, under the direction of Bramwell Tovey, also includes Walton's *The Spitfire: Prelude and Fugue* and Holst's ever popular *The Planets*.

We spoke with Mark Kosower by telephone and began by asking him why he decided to perform Barber's concerto.

Mark Kosower: I've always had an affinity for the piece ever since I learned it back in 1996. It was a piece I came across in 1995 and I immediately fell in love with it. The combination of the beautiful lyricism of the writing combined with motoric and rhythmic drive make the piece really exciting from beginning to end.

I also thought the concerto would work at Blossom. On one of my first concerts with the orchestra we played some music by Aaron Copland and to me that was the perfect music for that setting. Being profound, American, and out there surrounded by nature, it embodied the American spirit. I think this concerto is very much in the same vein, and I could envision this music soaring out from under the pavilion onto the hillside.

*MT: Everything I have read mentions the concerto's technical challenges.*

MK: That was something that drew me to the concerto as well. As young aspiring cellists, we're always looking for new challenges so I was also drawn to the virtuosity of the work. But as with all great works of art, it's not just about virtuosity for virtuosity's sake, it's in service of the expression of the music.

If you include contemporary cello techniques, the writing is traditional, but I think what separates it from other more traditionally written pieces is the use of double-stops in rapid succession, and the constant shifting from the lower to the upper registers and back —

there's jumping up and down all the time. And I would say that was something that had not been done until this concerto was written.

*MT: I have also read — although when you're reading things online you're never quite sure what to trust and not to trust...*

MK: [laughing] of course! The Internet is not a scholarly place.

*MT: But I did read that Barber had Raya Garbousova play her entire repertoire for him so he could understand what she was capable of doing. Is this true?*

MK: I can't completely verify that one way or the other, but that is what I understand. I do know for certain that Barber worked very closely with her and would send challenging passage work to her all the time so she could play it and offer feedback as to whether or not it was playable or suited the instrument. So she was intimately involved in the writing of the cello part of the concerto.

*MT: There is also a surprisingly small number of recordings of the piece.*

MK: As far as commercial recordings go, I can tell you there were three early champions of the work. Of course Raya Garbousova, who I understand toured during the late 40s and early 50s and played it with many of the leading orchestras in this country. And then in the 50s and into the 60s it was Leonard Rose and Zara Nelsova. Then, basically the concerto kind of fell off the map for the next twenty some years.

It did see a revival starting with Yo-Yo Ma's recording around 1989 with the Baltimore Symphony and by the mid 1990s there were recordings by Steven Isserlis and Ralph Kirshbaum and then a wonderful recording by Wendy Warner.

There were also articles published about how great a contribution the concerto was to American cello literature during the early part of the last decade by *Strad Magazine* and other publications. But now you don't hear about it again. So it is interesting how pieces come to the attention of everyone and then fall off again. But certainly the concerto is much more in the minds of musicians than it was twenty some years ago.

*MT: Have you ever thought of writing your own scholarly paper about the piece?*

MK: It's certainly a piece I have spent a lot of time with and have done research on and there is a lot of information about the piece in the Barber biography. It would be worth doing but I have not thought about being the one to publish anything, although the concerto has played an important role in my musical life. The first time I first played it was with the Minnesota Orchestra and I was stunned to find out that the only person to have ever played it with them was Raya Garbousova. I was even more surprised to find out it's never been played by The Cleveland Orchestra considering it was written in 1945 and is easily one of the top five or six cello concertos of the last century.

*MT: That is very surprising because it is a beautiful work. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the concerto?*

MK: There's an interesting piece of trivia about the last movement and while it has been documented there is no proof that it affected the writing, but it certainly reflected the feeling that was in the air all over the world at that time. Apparently he was writing the movement when the first of the two atomic bombs was dropped on Hiroshima, and he picked up what he had written in the last movement, crumpled it up, threw it away and started over. To me that was always a very interesting thing.

The concerto is full of naïveté — the rhythmic eighth notes in the first movement are supposed to depict the machines in the factories in America during the early 1920's. And there is the feeling of Americana throughout the concerto in the melodic writing. In the last movement you have a dance rhythm but it is syncopated so it almost feels a little jazzy and the second theme of the movement builds gradually into a dissonant, frightening-sounding climax. And to me that can only be a reflection on how everybody must have felt at the time.

*MT: And it's interesting that you will be performing it only two days prior to the anniversary of Hiroshima. Fascinating! Is there anything else you would like to share about the concerto?*

MK: Just that the slow movement is very nostalgic, reflective and has almost a resignation about it that is emotionally heavy, I would say. And maybe not surprising for a war-time composition.

*MT: That is another very interesting point. I had completely glossed over what was happening in the world at the time of the writing. I'm happy you're bringing it to Cleveland.*

MK: I'm very happy they programmed it and I think when we were talking about it last year everyone was excited about it. I'm sure with every orchestra there are a few great pieces that have somehow slipped through the cracks and have never been played.

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