

**Preview****Cleveland Orchestra: a conversation  
with violin soloist Ray Chen**

by Mike Telin



On Sunday, August 11 beginning at 7:00 pm the sounds of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* will fill the Blossom Music Center grounds when violinist Ray Chen makes his debut with The Cleveland Orchestra. The concert under the direction of Jahja Ling also features Rossini's Overture to *The Thieving Magpie* and Mendelssohn's *Symphony No. 3*.

Born in Taiwan and raised in Australia, Ray Chen studied at the Curtis Institute of Music. Following wins at the Yehudi Menuhin (2008) and Queen Elisabeth (2009) competitions, Chen's international career has been on a fast track forward. You can read about his accomplishments and numerous

other interests on his [website](#).

But let's get directly to our conversation. We reached Ray Chen by telephone in Germany where he had just finished a recording session for his third, all-Mozart album with Christoph Eschenbach and the Schleswig-Holstein Festival Orchestra.

*Mike Telin: Congratulations on your Cleveland Orchestra debut*

Ray Chen: Thanks! I'm really excited. I went to the Encore School for Strings in 2006 and 2007 and I attended some concerts at Blossom. I remember hearing Christian Tetzlaff play the Tchaikovsky *Violin Concerto* and the second half was *Scheherazade*. That is a strong memory — sitting on the lawn — because as students we weren't going to pay for pavilion seats. So I am really excited because there is more of a personal connection when you go back to the places you have been as a student. And to be able to be on the other side is fantastic.

*MT: So you've gone from the lawn to the stage in a very short amount of time; congratulations for that as well.*

RC: [laughing] Thank you!

*MT: You're laughing, but in all seriousness you did go from Encore in 2006 and 2007 to winning the Menuhin in 2008 and the Queen Elisabeth in 2009 and your career has taken off from there; did you ever think it would happen so quickly?*

RC: I'm not sure what to say except there must be something in the water in Cleveland. But I have to say that nobody can predict such a curve in terms of learning. It was sort of a struggle in 2006 then suddenly something clicked during that second summer at Encore, and I remember it very clearly. My project that summer was the Brahms concerto and learning that piece gave me something extra. I took the archival recording home and played it for my mom and she said, oh, this sounds different, you've improved a lot. Yes, it really was like a light went on and suddenly everything became clear.

*MT: I understand and it's a great feeling when the light does come on. You'll will be playing Vivaldi's Four Seasons, which as you know is a very popular piece; why do think people like it so much?*

RC: The way I see it, it's because it's just rock star music. Could you imagine being back in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and hearing this music during a concert? It's also so much fun to play. I've never performed all four concertos in one concert. I've done them all separately so doing them all together will be something new for me as well.

I think everyone's favorite is *Summer*, well at least mine is. And there are a few different ways to order them. It's always nice to start with *Spring* and that's why so many people finish with *Winter*. But if I want to finish with *Summer* then that means I'm messing with the seasons. But I'm from Australia so I could say that something went wrong because I'm from south of the equator. But who knows, and I'm sure the conductor will have something to say about that.

*MT: Have you worked with Jahja Ling before?*

RC: I have, I worked with him in San Diego and we immediately hit it off. And when he invited me to Cleveland it was like — as you said — from the lawn to the stage, a dream come true.

When Jahja asked me about the *Four Seasons* I said, hey that's great and people love it. I'm not one of those musicians who wants to go out of their way to find something obscure just because. I think it's cool, but personally it's just not me. And at this point in my career I am still a big fan of the mainstream pieces. I think there's a reason why they're mainstream — people love them and they're great works.

*MT: I agree and sometimes I don't want to be intellectually challenged especially in the summer. I just want to sit back and enjoy.*

RC: Exactly, and I think the last thing you want to do when you're having a picnic with wine, cheese and fruit is to suddenly be hit in the face with something that is like, wow, do I have to dissect a tone row?

*MT: Speaking of being hit in the face, I was reading that you had taken up boxing. Are you still doing that?*

RC: Yes, and it's been almost a year now. I really enjoy it: it's that release of energy. I was always into outdoor activities because growing up in Australia, you can't not be, it's a life style. You can't be normal and not play sports. And me, playing classical music, I had to balance that with a lot of sports. I didn't want to be seen as a weirdo nerd so I also played a lot of tennis, soccer and swam, which are the safest sports for the hands. A friend told me to stay away from sports that could hurt your hands, but with boxing you do have the wraps and the gloves. And if you're not doing it competitively you're basically either hitting a bag or you have a trainer with you.

It's a great way to let loose and you are using your whole body the same as what we do in violin playing — it's that quick, fast bow stroke. When you throw a punch you literally throw it and it's quick. And you just learn more about your body and balancing, stuff like that. I wouldn't say that I'm in the ring, I just do it because it's a great way to learn more about yourself.

*MT: I love boxing, it's a great sport. You have so many interesting sides and I'm now referring to your blog where you write about your touring life for the Italian publisher RCS Rizzoli.*

RC: I do have a lot of interests, but obviously the music always comes first. For example these last three weeks I haven't updated anything because I was focusing on the recording. It is great to have all of these extra things, but in the end if the musicianship is not at the highest level you're simply cheapening yourself and that's the dangerous thing. But musicians are also under a lot of pressure to be seen — and I hesitate to use the word — normal in the eyes of the public.

I think presenters, symphony orchestras, we all agree that we want to be more accessible. You always hear that classical music is losing popularity so people are focusing on how to reach out to new audiences. But at the same time, sometimes when musicians do that there can be so much criticism.

*MT: Exactly! And I think a lot of the criticism comes from the press and social media.*

RC: Yes, it's like "so and so is selling themselves out". Luckily I haven't been criticized for doing all of this, but then again I am not at the same level as some musicians. I always think that it's funny when people say someone is selling themselves out then on another day they'll be complaining about how classical music is losing popularity. It's just so ironic. So I guess you can't please everyone.

*MT: Ironic indeed.*

RC: People have a certain image in their minds of who you are based on the things you have done. I think at this point Facebook is a great way for me to make sure that the image people have of me is directly from me. I run my own Facebook page. I think we're

almost to 17K fans and that's something that I am very proud of. It's also another great way to remain accessible, and after all, music is all about communicating.

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