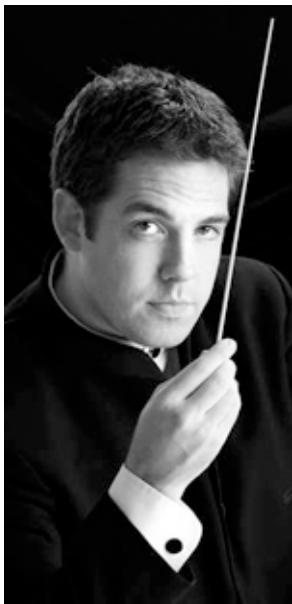


Preview

Brett Mitchell takes up the reins of Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra

by Mike Telin



The 2013-14 season marks Brett Mitchell's first year as assistant conductor of The Cleveland Orchestra. And on Sunday, November 3 at 3:00 pm, Mitchell will make his Severance Hall debut as music director of the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra (COYO) in a concert featuring the music of Shostakovich, Stravinsky, Kilar and Mussorgsky.

In addition to his position in Cleveland, Brett Mitchell is currently in his fourth season as music director of Michigan's Saginaw Bay Symphony Orchestra. Prior to Cleveland, Mitchell served as assistant conductor of the Houston Symphony from 2007 to 2011.

Additionally, he has led an impressive list of orchestras including the London Philharmonic and the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, as well as the orchestras of Baltimore, Memphis, Oregon, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Rochester, the Frankfurt Radio Symphony, Washington D.C.'s National Symphony Orchestra, Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, and the Northwest Mahler Festival Orchestra.

Mitchell says that working with young people has always been part of his career and a part that he enjoys enormously. "I love working with kids," the Seattle native says enthusiastically during our relaxed conversation in his Severance Hall office. "They're so eager and have such great energy, and are so open and so giving." He adds that, technically speaking, his first music directorship was with the North Sound Youth Symphony in Bellingham, Washington. "I was halfway through my senior year of undergraduate school when they asked me to fill in for the remainder of that season."

As part of his audition back in January, Mitchell had the opportunity to conduct COYO, "I was truly impressed. I was impressed with them then and sure enough I am impressed now." He points out that it is unusual for a major orchestra such as Cleveland to also run a youth orchestra program. "And the fact that COYO is not even 30 years old and has become so renowned says a lot about many constituencies. First, the young musicians. You don't get this reputation unless you have quality young musicians. Second, it also says a lot about TCO and the dedicated faculty coaches that work with them every week. You can't replace them as mentors for the young people."

Mitchell says that he does see his position as being primarily pedagogical. “I am here to serve the audience but I am here primarily to serve the students.” And it is the long term service to his young musicians that guided his choice for repertoire for his first concert. “I think it is an interesting program, but it’s a fine line between achieving a good blend of music that is pedagogically sound and enjoyable for COYO, and what is enjoyable for the audience.”

Sunday's concert will end with the Ravel orchestration of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* — working backwards in his method of choice. “Once I have the big piece settled, for this concert the Shostakovich *Festive Overture* (which begins the program) fell into place rather quickly.” When it comes to the middle pieces on the program, Mitchell says he wanted to spend some time alone with winds and brass as well as time alone with the strings. “Stravinsky's *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* will give us time to work on wind and brass things. And Polish composer Wojciech Kilar's *Orawa* is only for strings, so that will give us time to work on string stuff. I think we will be very well served for the rest of the season having spent this time together.”

Mitchell's official debut with COYO was last Tuesday when they performed a runout concert at Lorain County Community College, which he says went very well, “I think, judging by the reaction on Tuesday, that we have succeeded.”

Fifteen Minutes with Brett Mitchell

Mike Telin: Did you grow up in a musical family?

Brett Mitchell: I didn't grow up with classical music. At home my parents and I listened to a lot of pop and jazz. It wasn't until high school that I started listening to and performing classical music. I really didn't know what I was doing, so my teachers said that I should start by getting to know the classics like the symphonies of Beethoven, Mozart and Brahms.

It's kind of come full circle because the first recordings I bought were the complete Beethoven symphonies with Szell and Cleveland. And now I am in my second month as assistant conductor and we're doing three of the nine symphonies this weekend, I am still pinching myself every morning. It is remarkable.

MT: You really can't do any better than those recordings.

BM: No. If you're trying to learn what an orchestra that plays well sounds like and what an orchestra is supposed to sound like, it is those recordings.

MT: What instrument did you play?

BM: I started as a pianist although I shouldn't say that because it gives me too much credit. I should say I started out playing the piano. I took lessons in elementary school and although I stopped taking lessons I did keep playing. In fourth grade I started playing the saxophone because of listening to pop music, and it was the mid 80's, so it made logi-

cal sense. I played until tenth grade when I broke my sax playing in pep band and it was easier to switch to the percussion section rather than to tell my parents I broke it. And It turned out that I had a bit of a propensity for playing percussion. While the piano remained my primary instrument in high school honors band and college ensembles I did play in the percussion section.

MT: Getting back to the Beethoven symphonies and this week with the Fate and Freedom Festival, how are you feeling now that, as you said, things have come full circle?

BM: In some sense it's like I can't believe that I get to do this, but in another it's like I can't be star struck because I do have a job to do. I will say that it is an enormous pleasure to sit in the hall and be an audience of one. But my job is to be able to step in if needed and conduct.

I'm also a little older than your average staff conductor [laughing] — in my early 30's if you're being generous and mid 30's if you're being honest. But that does mean that the Beethoven symphonies 3, 4 and 5, I've done all of them a number of times so I am comfortable with them. It also allows me to appreciate all of the intricacies and subtleties that Franz and the orchestra are able to bring to the performances even more.

MT: When did you first discover Shostakovich?

BM: This does put this week into context because one of the very first classical composers I got to know was Shostakovich. But again it comes from my time of playing in high school band. There is a marvelous transcription of the finale of Shostakovich 5 and I had a great time playing the timpani part. Yes, things have come full circle.

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