

Preview**Cleveland Orchestra: a conversation
with guest conductor Marc Albrecht**

by Mike Telin



“My Cleveland Orchestra debut, yes it’s very exciting for me,” conductor Marc Albrecht said during a recent telephone conversation. “And I think it’s an interesting program too.” Beginning on Thursday at 7:30 pm in Severance Hall, The Cleveland Orchestra under the direction of Marc Albrecht will present three performances featuring Mahler’s *Blumine* and *Songs of a Wayfarer* with mezzo-soprano Alice Coote, as well as Brahms’s *Piano Quartet* arranged by Arnold Schoenberg.

Marc Albrecht was born into an artistic family in Hanover, Germany, although finding his own musical voice was always important to him. And it was the late Claudio Abbado who helped him do that. You can read about all of his professional accomplishments [here](#), but let’s proceed to the conversation, because Marc Albrecht is fascinating. We reached him in Amsterdam and began by asking him about this weekend’s program.

Marc Albrecht: I’m very fond of Schoenberg’s arrangement of Brahms’s *Quartet in g minor*. I’ve known it for many years and conducted it several times. It’s a miracle what Schoenberg does with it. He knew it so well because he was a talented cellist and had played the original version several times. So he knew it backwards and forwards. Later in America, where he had immigrated to escape the Nazis, he was desperately in search of work and it was there that he started to write this so called ‘Symphony No. 5’. Obviously Brahms only wrote four symphonies but it does feel a bit like a fifth Brahms symphony.

It’s fascinating because the piece has less to do with Brahms than Schoenberg thought. But it is simply a fantastic piece and it’s very modern in the way he transcribed it.

Mike Telin: *Yes and many times we forget that Schoenberg was a great transcriber and arranger.*

MA: He was a master arranger. I always think he was the perfect synthesis of both Brahms or Wagner and you can really feel that he learned so much from both composers. I also think it’s very playful. It’s a real musicians’ piece and that’s great because it is a lot of fun to play.

MT: *What led you to decide on the two Mahlers, Blumine and Songs of a Wayfarer?*

MA: I recorded Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* with Alice last year and we wanted to continue with his songs so she came up with the idea to do *Wayfarer*. Then I thought, well this is from Mahler's early period and *Blumine* was originally part of his first symphony, although it was taken out, but it's such a wonderful and inspired piece. And the *Wayfarer* songs are very much influenced by the musical language of the first symphony. So the two pieces, *Blumine* and *Wayfarer* have exactly the same spirit and they do belong together like sister and brother. I think they almost talk to each other.

MT: *You mentioned the recording of Das Lied von der Erde that you made with Alice, which I think is beautiful. Why do you think she's such a great interpreter of Mahler?*

MA: She's great with the language and that's important, she can give so many personal colors to each word. I think there's something especially moving when she sings Mahler. She transports all of the diverse feelings and emotions, she's extremely lively in this way. I loved working with her on the recording and we're lucky to be able to continue with *Wayfarer* songs in Cleveland, it's a fantastic thing.

MT: *I watched a few videos on YouTube of you discussing the music of Mahler. You have a very eloquent way of talking about his music especially in terms of nature. Have you ever thought about creating video lectures about him?*

MA: No, not yet, but it is a good question and I could imagine doing that one day. It's a question of time [laughing] but yes, I could see it. Basically what I was saying during those videos are things that I share with the musicians. Mahler is extremely important to me, in my personal life and as a musician and artist. And I feel I have just started to explore it — it's a never-ending love story. I like his early music very much because you can really feel, like in the *Wayfarer* and the first symphony, there is already so much there, you feel that trace of genius already.

MT: *You served as the assistant to the late Claudio Abbado. If you don't mind, would you share a few thoughts about him?*

MA: Sure — and obviously these are very special weeks, I just returned from Vienna conducting at the Musikverein and the concerts were dedicated to Claudio Abbado. It was in Vienna where I started working with him as his assistant. When I was studying there I followed most of his programs, especially opera and the Vienna Philharmonic. Then I became his assistant so I was around him for some years.

He was extremely inspiring for me, especially with Mahler. I had the honor to prepare all of the big Mahler symphonies for him with the orchestra, then he would take over for the last week of rehearsals and the concerts. So we shared this work together in Vienna and on many tours.

He was the most inspiring teacher — if I could say so, because he didn't really teach conducting — which is why I approached him to be his assistant. That was the only chance I had to really learn from him. He would never teach at a university, and he didn't give master classes. So being the assistant of Claudio's was really the best way to learn. So yes, it was very precious for me and he was an extremely warm-hearted person.

MT: Your father is also a conductor. Did you feel pressure to follow in his footsteps?

MA: Obviously he was my first introduction to conducting. And honestly, I did have some difficult years. [laughing] But at the end of my schooling when I did my bachelor's I took the opportunity to move to Vienna so I didn't see him conduct for quite a while. It was during this time that I met Claudio Abbado, but even then I was not really sure I would pursue conducting as a profession. I couldn't imagine doing it my way and not just following my father. But my experience in Vienna and experience with Abbado was very strong and after two or three years I knew I was on the right track.

Happily now we're good friends and colleagues. He's still conducting even though he's almost 80 years old. He's often at concerts I'm conducting and it's a wonderful exchange because he's not just a family member but also a colleague. And that is very inspiring for me.

MT: That's very nice to hear and you are a very lucky person.

MA: I am! Absolutely. Having all of these influences at a very early stage in my career was of course a big advantage. And of course I still had to define what I really wanted, what would be my way of making music. These are questions I ask myself in an even more urgent way because I was so close to everything. But asking them was something very good and necessary to do. Every artist has to find the need to go on, the need to do what they are doing. And if you don't find it, as they say, stay out of the kitchen if you don't need something to eat.

Of course I meet a lot of people who also have a passion for what they do and I'm very happy I made this decision. And the Vienna years with Claudio Abbado were great for me.

Published on clevelandclassical.com February 11, 2014