

Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra opens its season on Sunday, November 23

by Mike Telin



“When we held auditions this past May, it became clear that we would have a great group of players coming on board,” Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra (COYO) music director Brett Mitchell said during a recent conversation. “I just had the feeling that we were going to have a very special year.” On Sunday, November 23 at 8:00 pm in Severance Hall, Mitchell and his young players will present their first concert of the 2014-15 season. The program will feature music by John Adams, Roy Harris and Tchaikovsky.

It appears that Mitchell’s gut feeling was correct. He pointed out that once a student becomes a COYO member, they can remain a member until they graduate high school. However, the downside is that he could end up losing anywhere from a quarter to a third of his orchestra each year. “And of course the ones you lose are the most experienced players. That can present a real challenge with regard to programming.” This year Mitchell estimates that approximately 35 of the 100 players are first-year members, but this did not deter him from choosing a challenging program to open their season. “I knew this was a group that would step up to the plate, and they have.”

Sunday’s program will include Tchaikovsky’s *Symphony No. 4*. “At the first rehearsal I asked the orchestra how many of them have played this piece. There was only one person. But each week I ask them to ratchet up their game one more notch, and they do! Now we’ve got this symphony sounding every bit as good as anything we did last season. This is going to be a very special performance of this work, and that is so exciting for me.”

Mitchell will begin the program with John Adams’s *The Chairman Dances: Foxtrot for Orchestra*, an outtake from Act III of Adams’s opera *Nixon in China*. “Adams said that

he had been commissioned to write an orchestral work for the Milwaukee Symphony. But he had already received the commission to work on an opera that would later become *Nixon in China*, which he couldn't wait to start working on. The music for *The Chairman Dances* didn't make it into the opera. It's like when you get a DVD that has all of the deleted scenes at the end – well this is one of those deleted scenes.”

Another reason for selecting the Adams is to highlight COYO's June 2015 tour to China. “I'm very excited to get to spend some time with this fantastic orchestra in China and to be able to show off our American orchestral chops across the pond. It's going to be a great thrill.”

A work that has been a long-time favorite of Brett Mitchell's is Roy Harris's *Symphony No. 3 in one movement*. “I was first introduced to it when I was an undergraduate student majoring in composition. My teacher felt it was very important for me to listen to as much American music as possible. I asked him where I should start, and he suggested that I listen to the symphonies of the great mid-century composers like the third symphonies of Harris, Schuman and Copland, and Hanson's “Romantic” as well. So I came to the symphony very early, and I've loved it for a long time, but this will be my first time conducting it.”

Learning to portray as many different characters as possible within a single work is something Mitchell feels is important to the education of orchestral players. He thinks that Harris's symphony is the perfect work for that. “The symphony shows off the orchestra really well. It's such a colorful piece with contrasting sections, even though it's in one movement. Harris has divided it into five parts: Tragic, Lyrical, Pastoral, Fugue dramatic, and Dramatic tragic. I continually remind the young musicians that we're telling a story to the audience, not just playing notes.”

Mitchell feels strongly that as important as it is to learn great orchestral repertoire, it's of equal importance to develop a ‘we're all in this together’ frame of mind. “We rotate players into different positions as much as we possibly can. For example, I don't put people in the concertmaster's chair that I don't think can do the job, but I also want to give more than one person that opportunity.” Mitchell adds that wind and brass players also rotate chairs between pieces. “We'll never have one person playing principal flute for an entire concert. And I have to say that we really hit the jackpot with all of the principals this time. All of them are doing a phenomenal job of leading their sections.”

Published on ClevelandClassical.com November 18, 2014.

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