

Preview

ChamberFest Cleveland: conversations with cellist Gabriel Cabezas, speaker Patrick Castillo and composer Andrew Norman

by Mike Telin



Beginning on Thursday, June 20 and running through Sunday, June 30 with performances and activities in traditional concert and non-traditional venues around Cleveland, the 2013 edition of [ChamberFest Cleveland](#) has something to offer to all. During the past week we have had the opportunity to speak with three ChamberFest artists: returning guest speaker Patrick Castillo, composer Andrew Norman and the renowned young cellist [Gabriel Cabezas](#) (left), who will open this season's festival with a free prelude recital on

June 20 in Mixon Hall beginning at 7:00 pm. Cabezas, the winner of the 15th annual [Sphinx Competition](#), and Sphinx's 2012 Isaac Stern Award, will be joined by pianist [Orion Weiss](#) in a program that features the music of Janáček and Debussy.

Although Cabezas has already amassed an impressive list of performances with orchestras including the New York Philharmonic, The Cleveland Orchestra, the Chicago Symphony, the National Symphony of Costa Rica, the Pittsburgh Symphony, the New World Symphony, and the Nashville Symphony, he says that he equally enjoys playing chamber music, "I really look forward to working with Orion and all of the musicians who will be part of ChamberFest." In addition to Thursday's recital Cabezas will also be part of the performances at the Transformer Station on June 21 and in Harkness Chapel on June 23.

The Chicago native says that he was always interested in music and attended a local Suzuki school, "I first went to a violin class. It was beginning violin playing so I wasn't really into it, so they gave me a cello and it stuck," he says with a chuckle. Cabezas, who won the Sphinx Competition Junior Division in 2006 at age 13 credits that win for jump-starting his career, "I liked the performances, the travel and everything associated with what we do. So winning the junior division gave me a lot of preliminary performance experience and helped me with a lot of good opportunities. And winning the senior division was also wonderful. I've gotten several concerts because of that."

After studying with Hans Jensen, Cabezas went on to Curtis where he has been a student of Carter Brey for the past four years. He laughs when asked if he enjoys practicing. "There is this weird, love-hate relationship that you can have with practicing. It seems tedious but the rewards are great. Obviously at the beginning you have some bumps but

you get used to it, and now I do relish my practice time. It's valuable time to me." So how does the young cellist spend his free time? "Right now I don't have a lot, but — and this is oddly consistent with musicians — most of our free times ends up being spent either cooking or eating."

Patrick Castillo



Last season, guest speaker [Patrick Castillo](#) engaged ChamberFest audiences with his down-to-earth discussions about each concert's music. Castillo has a way of presenting even the most complex musico-logical information in an engaging manner that is attractive to all listeners no matter what classical music background they bring with them to the concerts.

Castillo has created an eclectic career as a composer, performer, writer, and educator. He has provided program notes for Music@Menlo, where he also serves as Artistic Administrator. Castillo has been a guest lecturer at the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, Chamber Music Festival of the Bluegrass (Kentucky), and Fordham University. He appears this season at String Theory at the Hunter (Chattanooga, TN).

We reached Patrick Castillo by telephone in Saint Paul, MN where he was wrapping up his tenure as Director of Artistic Planning of the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra. We began by asking him about his diverse career.

Patrick Castillo: I kind of have my thumb in a number of different pies. I'm primarily a composer by trade but have been doing various kinds of administrative work for the past ten years and I freelance as a lecturer and teacher. To me all of this activity is all part of a continuous spectrum, I don't really compartmentalize it. It's all part of how I relate to an art form that I care very passionately about.

MT: But it is almost a necessity for an artist to develop diverse skills.

PC: I think that creative artists, whether we are performers or composers or writers, there is an increasing importance to our consciousness of citizenship in our industry. I put it like this: Heifetz played the violin basically better than anybody and that was enough, and I think that with very few exceptions today that's just not enough anymore. I don't really know anybody who is exclusively a composer; everybody teaches, writes or does this or that. The days of Haydn working in the Esterházy palace are well over. So I think it's important for us to cultivate different ways of relating to and advocating for our art form. For me this has manifested itself in addition to composing to being able to write and speak about music.

MT: But the ability to see one's career in this way is still a relatively new thing.

PC: I do think the learning curve is pretty steep for a lot of artists because you're taught to just woodshed over and over, and the mentality is if you outwork the next guy you're

going to make it. And that's not true anymore and it has nothing to do with artistic merit, it's just circumstances.

But for me this has all been a very natural progression. It's a way that I can bring listeners and composers closer to each other. And ultimately it is a self-serving position because the more people there are out there who are interested in listening to serious concert music the better off I am as a practitioner of that art.

MT: How do you go about creating your talks? They are very engaging.

PC: I don't have a great philosophy to share but I have a rule of thumb which is I pretend that I am talking to my parents. I don't come from a musical family and my parents scratched their heads when I told them I wanted to study music and this is not an uncommon story among musicians. My parents have been very supportive, but [music] is not something they understand. So I have had a lot of practice explaining to them what I do. They are good sports about coming with me when I explain to them that the Cleveland Orchestra is playing in Carnegie and this is a great orchestra and you should hear it.

So I have had a lot of practice with uninitiated people whose ears are open to something new. Which is what I think Frank and Diana have found in the community that's coalesced around ChamberFest. Obviously you're not going to come without some baseline of interest, but there is a broad spectrum of expertise.

Patrick Castillo will lead *Coffee and Conversation*, on Tuesday, June 25 beginning at 6:00 pm at Temple-Tifereth Israel. The event is free and no tickets are required. On Wednesday, June 26 Castillo will be joined by Gabriel Cabezas for WCLV's *Music at Noon* in Idea Stream's Smith Studio. The event is free and no tickets are required.

Andrew Norman



On Wednesday, June 26 beginning at 8:00 pm in-Mixon Hall, ChamberFest presents a concert featuring Biber's *Battalia à 10 in D major* and Brahms' *String Sextet No. 2 in G major*. The concert also includes young American composer and 2012 Pulitzer Prize finalist [Andrew Norman's *The Companion Guide to Rome*](#). Beginning at 7:00 pm the composer will lead a discussion about the work.

Born in the Midwest in 1979, composer Andrew Norman was raised in California and attended the University of Southern California and Yale. Norman has received commissions from many orchestras including the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, the Minnesota Orchestra, and the Tonhalle Orchester Zürich. His chamber music has been featured at venues and festivals including Le Poisson Rouge, the MATA Festival, the Tanglewood

Festival of Contemporary Music, the Los Angeles Philharmonic's Green Umbrella Series, the Juilliard School Focus Festival.

Norman's list of awards and honors includes the 2005 ASCAP Nissim Prize, the 2006 Rome Prize and the 2009 Berlin Prize. In the near future Norman has projects and commissions from the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, where he will serve as Composer in Residence for the next three seasons, and the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, where he is currently Composer in Residence, as well as collaborations with the Calder Quartet, pianists Jeremy Denk and Emanuel Ax, percussionist Colin Currie and violinist Jennifer Koh.

We spoke with the thoroughly engaging Andrew Norman by telephone and talked about why he enjoys writing for the sting trio, and the pressures that come with having such a high profile career so young. But we began by asking him to tell us about the work.

Andrew Norman: I wrote one of the movements when I was a fellow at the American Academy, and that ended up being the last, *Sabina*. It was a couple of years later in 2010 that I ended up finishing the entire set. But I had the idea when I was in Rome.

MT: I understand that you had a mission to visit as many churches as possible in the city?

AN: There are a million churches in Rome and I was looking for a way to mark my experience, and to be able to see as much of the city as I could. So I started organizing it by the churches. I'm also a big fan of architecture, and sacred architecture in particular is fascinating to me — it's all about people from different periods of time expressing their thoughts about spirituality in the form of a building. And Rome has amazing architecture from so many periods.

What I found particularly interesting is how they just kept building and changing so many of the churches so you get a densely layered affect with a lot of them — elements from different periods that have nothing to do with one another, but are all in dialogue with one another within the same building. And I found that to be a rich metaphor for something I wanted to do in music.

MT: Are the movements all inspired by the architecture?

AN: Some of the movements are directly inspired by the architecture, and some of them are more about a work of art I saw inside the church. And some are loosely inspired by the narratives of the saints whose names the churches bear.

MT: Will you be bringing photographs?

AN: That's a good question. I do have lots of pictures, but I think the work can stand on its own without any visual elements. And I do think that the movements might spark something within peoples' imagination other than just look at this picture and listen to how I wrote the music about it.

MT: Yes. That can be a double-edged sword because what if the listener doesn't see that photo in the music?

AN: I know, and I'm all for providing hooks for people and giving them a window into what I was thinking, but I also think that there are many ways to experience a work.

MT: The last movement came first but it morphed into a 30 minute piece. Do you ever think it was going too far or can the movements operate independently?

AN: I do think of it as kind of a collection, so yes, the movements can work independently and people have performed subsets of the entire piece. And *Sabina* can be a stand-alone. But I arranged them in a way that I thought would make a convincing narrative arch. I did know that I wanted to create a large collection and I did have more movements in the first version that I ended up throwing away because they just weren't working.

MT: Many composers speak about the arch of a composition.

AN: *Sabina* is one ten-minute arch with its own emotional journey. But after I finished it I was thinking about what to do with it and that's where the idea to write eight other little pieces in front of it came. They are all small and contained and their world in very miniature, then you get this one giant thing in the end.

It's a form that I really love; a whole bunch of miniatures and then one big thing. It also plays with how we perceive time because after having heard so many little bites you get dropped into one expansive thing that doesn't seem to end, hopefully in a good way.
[Laughing]

MT: So why did you write it for a string trio? Why not a quartet?

AN: That's an interesting question, and first of all I'm a violist — a very bad violist, but a lot of my material comes from me improvising on the viola. So a lot of the sounds in this piece, especially the extended techniques, are all about sounds that I find very personal and that I feel physically connected to. And so first, why strings? That's because I'm a string player and so I naturally gravitate towards these sounds.

Then, the thing about a trio is that as a violist I tend to see the world from the viola out, so the trio makes so much more sense to me than a quartet because a trio is a viola and one instrument lower and one higher. It's kind of symmetrical that way. And I do think that string trios have a tradition of being a little more virtuosic than quartets because you have one fewer voices. No one can hide in a trio and everyone is more of a soloist all the time, which is something I also like.

I have written other string trios, and I seem to gravitate to the medium, which is unfortunate because there aren't many traveling string trios like there are quartets. But I kind of like that.

MT: I find this to be very interesting, and being a violist does bring an different perspective to things.

AN: Yes, and I find that even in my orchestral pieces I have to work to get a real bass or treble because everything is kind of in the middle. And as a violist that's where I naturally put everything. I love the viola and the cello and violin too, but a piece of this scope allows me to explore a wide range of what those three instruments can do.

MT: I need to congratulate you on all of your successes; did you ever think you would be doing all of this so soon in your career?

AN: Well, No. I mean, I've been composing since I was a little kid but it never occurred to me to do it as a profession because I always wanted to be an architect, which is one of the reasons I am often drawn to buildings for inspiration. But, I had a composition and piano teacher in high school who motivated me and got me excited about the craft of composing so one day I woke up and there I was in music school studying to be a composer. Even then I didn't give a lot of thought about what my career path was going to be, but somehow I have fallen into this fantastic career. And I do feel very fortunate that people have somehow found my music and found it interesting and have supported it.

MT: Does composing come easily for you?

AN: In the last ten years composing has not been easy. I'm not a fluent writer and many times I'm not entirely sure where I am going. And I've never been a confident composer. I always feel like I have so much to learn and so much to try and experiment with. And I'm often baffled by this career that has sort of been handed to me.

MT: But you have a very impressive list of commissions and residencies.

AN: One of the tricky things about having all of these commissions for high profile compositions is that it's hard to be a young composer at the same time — I mean someone who is experimenting and still finding their way. And taking risks is a tricky thing because I always want to be finding or trying something new but that often means there is a possibility that I may fall on my face in front of some fantastic orchestra and big audience somewhere. But part of the process of becoming a better composer is that I will have to take those risks. And inevitably I will have to fail during something that is a big and fantastic opportunity.

So that's sort of where I am at, and I know I have the career of someone who should be much older. But with every opportunity I just have to do the best that I can and be sincere and do what is genuinely interesting to me at that moment. And I try.

Published on clevelandclassical.com June 18, 2013