

Preview

Kent/Blossom Festival: an interview with Kulas Guest Artist David Shifrin

by Mike Telin



Clarinetist [David Shifrin](#) holds the distinction of being one of only two wind players to have been awarded the Avery Fisher Prize since the award's inception in 1974. As a recitalist, Shifrin has performed in distinguished venues throughout the world, and as a chamber musician he has collaborated with the Guarneri, Tokyo, and Emerson String Quartets, Wynton Marsalis, Emanuel Ax and André Watts. Shifrin has been an artist member of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center since 1989, and served as its artistic director from 1992 to 2004. As a teacher he has served on the faculties of the Juilliard School, University of Southern California, University of Michigan, and the Cleveland Institute of Music. He currently teaches at the Yale School of Music, a position he has held since 1987.

In addition to his Avery Fisher Prize, Shifrin has also received a Solo Recitalists' Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts and the 1998 Distinguished Alumnus Award from the Music Academy of the West. At the outset of his career, he won the top prize at both the Munich and the Geneva International Competitions. Most importantly, David Shifrin was a student at the Kent/Blossom Festival in 1970 and served on the festival's faculty from 1974 to 1976.

This week David Shifrin returns to the Kent/Blossom Festival as the first Kulas Guest Artist, and on Saturday, June 29 beginning at 7:30 pm in Ludwig Recital Hall, he and pianist Spencer Myer will perform a recital that features the music of Schumann, Brahms, Poulenc, Stravinsky and Debussy.

We reached David Shifrin by telephone in Portland, Oregon where he has served as the artistic director of Chamber Music Northwest since 1981. During our conversation he told us about his unforgettable experience as a student at the Kent/Blossom Festival and why he feels summer festivals play an important role in the education of young musicians. He also talked about being the successor to Robert Marcellus as principal clarinetist in The Cleveland Orchestra, and the opportunities that led to his decision to pursue a career as a soloist, chamber music player and teacher. We began by asking him why he chose the music for Saturday's program.

David Shifrin: It's funny because when Keith (Robbie) Robinson talked to me about this concert, he told me there was this wonderful pianist who would be there and would I work with Spencer Myer. At the time I wasn't clear about who Spencer was but Robbie recommended him so highly I said, great. But when Spencer and I started communicating he mentioned that we had played together when he was playing the Schumann concerto with the New Haven Symphony and I was playing principal clarinet, which I do occasionally on a free-lance basis. The concerto has some glorious melodic clarinet passages and for a moment the piano actually accompanies the clarinet, and he reminded me of that. We thought that we should play some Schumann, so we'll be playing the *Fantasiestücke*, opus 73, to open the program.

Of course there is a major link between the music of Schumann and Brahms: mentor, protégé in the mantle of the great classical tradition during the nineteenth century. I think the very first performances of Brahms's clarinet sonatas were at Clara Schumann's home where Brahms and Richard Mühlfeld performed the *Fantasy Pieces* along with his two sonatas. So it's a very natural pairing to play Schumann and Brahms on the first half of the program.

Spencer is a very serious and well regarded concert pianist and I didn't want to offend him by programming anything that didn't sound like it was an equal footing duo, but I love the connection between Stravinsky, Poulenc and Debussy — Debussy having been the second pianist during the rehearsals for the *Rite of Spring* one hundred years ago. And he was something of a mentor to Stravinsky. And Poulenc of course was greatly influenced by both Stravinsky and Debussy.

So we'll do the Stravinsky *Solo Pieces* and the *Première Rhapsodie*. Debussy titled it "Première" so we all just wonder what the second *Rhapsodie* might have sounded like had he written one. And many people have adapted a number of Debussy's works for different instrumental combinations, so we have taken two wonderful miniatures, *Little Shepherd* from the *Children's Corner Suite* and *Girl with the Flaxen Hair* from the first book of *Préludes* and adapted them for clarinet and piano, all leading to the *Première Rhapsodie*. And that's how the program came together. I feel so lucky to have been invited to do this. Spencer and I have been rehearsing since the middle of last month in New York and we're having a great time.

Mike Telin: It's a great program and yes, Spencer is a wonderful person and a great pianist. So, how does it feel to be returning to a festival where you were both a student and teacher.

DS: It's very exciting for me! Throughout my high school years I admired The Cleveland Orchestra and then principal clarinetist Robert Marcellus but I was not able to study with him because I went to the Curtis Institute. But while I was a student I really wanted to work with Mr. Marcellus, so I applied to Kent/Blossom, got in, and that experience really opened my eyes to many things about playing the clarinet and about music.

The summer I was there had to be one of the most intense and interesting times during Kent State's history. Musically, in addition to Louis Lane working with the student or-

chestra, Pierre Boulez also did an enormous amount of work with the students. We played Messiaen's *Oiseaux Exotiques* and he coached Schoenberg's *Pierrot* with the great Jan de Gaetani and a student group. It was a remarkable experience.

Aaron Copland also came as a guest and I remember being coached by him on the song he set for flute clarinet and soprano, *It Fell Upon a Day*. Just walking into the cafeteria and seeing Aaron Copland with his tray sitting around and talking about music with the students was pretty amazing. Yes, Boulez, Copland, de Gaetani and members of The Cleveland Orchestra — it was pretty inspiring.

1970 was also one of the most trying and difficult times in history. It was literally just two months after the shootings on campus. And it was also during the Festival that George Szell passed away. So it was unforgettable, tragic, wonderful and intense in so many ways. There is no way I can ever forget being a student there.

Then about three and a half years later I was appointed the successor to Mr. Marcellus in The Cleveland Orchestra and began three summers of teaching at Kent/Blossom. That was a very different experience from being a student and it took some adjusting.

I do have very warm feeling about the place and this will be the first time that I am coming back to perform as part of the festival. I have been back to Kent State as a guest of the Miami Quartet, but this will be my first time at the Festival since 1976. So I am very excited about it.

MT: Why do you think is it important for young musicians to involve themselves in summer festivals?

DS: That's a great question. As a teacher I start asking my students in the early fall what they are going to be doing the following summer. It's an interesting and rather archaic aspect of our education system from public schools through colleges that education takes place during two thirds of the year then there are the months off. I've heard it said that it's from the early years of the United States being an agrarian nation and people needed their kids to work on the farms. But I don't think that applies to young inspiring musicians. To study intensely for seven or eight months and then put the instrument away until the fall doesn't cut it.

There is such a variety of experiences available at all of the festivals and summer programs for advanced students and young professionals at the beginning of their careers. It has turned into kind of a balance between the intensity of the school year at the many wonderful conservatories and universities and festivals like Blossom, Marlboro and Tanglewood — and Kent/Blossom, which was for me the perfect situation at that stage in my life.

I think that festivals are more about applying your trade. It felt then, and feels now that students have a chance during the summer to do what amounts to an internship. Working with people in a situation that is performance-focused. And there is the assumption that if you were accepted into one of these festivals that you have the technical ability and the professional ability to learn repertory.

MT: I agree completely. Finally, when you were at Kent/Blossom, did you ever think that you would become one of the few wind players to have a career as a soloist and chamber music player?

DS: As a student I had hoped that there might be a possibility for that, but I also understood [laughing] that I needed to make a living. And I was just lucky beyond belief to have a succession of orchestral jobs that culminated with being principal in Cleveland. I was daunted by being the replacement for someone who I held in such high regard as Mr. Marcellus. And it was the greatest honor ever but I was swamped by learning all of the orchestral repertoire. I came in the middle of the season because he had to slow down because of his health, so as a twenty-something I was playing concerts without rehearsals of pieces I had never played. It was intense and I did it for three years, but I was also beginning to have more and more opportunities to play chamber music and solo concerts. So because of the orchestra's schedule along with these other opportunities in addition to being offered a full time teaching position at the University of Michigan, I went in a different direction. Although I did think that I might do it for a while and then maybe go back to an orchestra, but it has worked out. Its worked out just fine.

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