

Review

Three soloists to make their debuts with The Cleveland Orchestra at Blossom: Part one — Cédric Tiberghien

by Mike Telin



It's always a special occasion when a musician has the opportunity to perform as a soloist with The Cleveland Orchestra, and if it's your own debut there is even more excitement added to the occasion. This summer three young musicians will be making their Cleveland Orchestra debuts — pianist Cédric Tiberghien (Saint-Saëns's *Concerto #2 in g minor* on Saturday, July 27); violinist Ray Chen (Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* on Sunday, August 11); and pianist Martin Helmchen (Beethoven's *Piano Concerto #1 in C major* on August 24). All three gentlemen are lively conversational-

ists who had plenty to say about being part of the new generation of artists committed to engaging with and attracting new audiences to classical music.

And what does a performance with the Cleveland Orchestra mean to the three? "It's one of the things that when I look at my calendar it's a little bit unbelievable," says Martin Helmchen. For Ray Chen, the opportunity brings on extra excitement: "I remember going to concerts at Blossom and sitting on the lawn when I was a student in 2006 and 2007 at the Encore School for Strings. So this performance has a very personal connection. To have been there as a kid and now to be on the other side, it's just great!" Cédric Tiberghien calls it "absolutely amazing. It's an incredible opportunity for me and I'm really looking forward to it." Today is the first of three features spotlighting the debuting soloists.

French pianist Cédric Tiberghien's career has taken him across five continents and to some of the world's most prestigious halls. In addition to his Cleveland debut, his 2012-13 season also includes debuts with the Seattle Symphony, Cincinnati Symphony and Rotterdam Philharmonic, to name a few. His discography includes Brahms's *Concerto No. 1* with the BBC Symphony and six recital discs on Harmonia Mundi. His most recent release features César Franck's *Symphonic Variations* and *Les Djinns*, with the Liège Philharmonic. He has performed with numerous orchestras including Paris, Orchestre National de France, Sydney Symphony, Tokyo Philharmonic, New Japan Philharmonic, Gelders Orkest, Stuttgart Staatsorchester, Hamburger Philharmoniker and Dresden Phil-

harmonic. A dedicated chamber musician, Tiberghien regularly partners with violinist Alina Ibragimova, soprano Sophie Karthäuser and cellist Pieter Wispelwey.

During recent tour of Australia, Cédric Tiberghien collaborated with visual artist Domenico Clario. While performing Schumann's *Kreisleriana*, Clario represented and interpreted the music through a series of paintings, following him from canvas to canvas. In a recent telephone conversation from Paris, Cédric Tiberghien talked about that experience, but we began our conversation by asking him why he thinks the second piano concerto of Saint-Saëns has become so popular with audiences.

Cédric Tiberghien: First it is a theatrical piece — the way it starts is really kind of a prelude to an opera. From the very beginning we realize that it will be kind of Lisztean where the pianist is improvising, and showing all of the theatrical possibilities of the instrument. And the first movement has a wonderful tune; it's not very long and not repeated much but it's just so beautiful. The harmonies are quite simple but they really work. There is nothing extremely complex so it's kind of an easy piece to listen to.

The second movement, and I say this even to the conductors, has to be like a glass of good champagne — a good one because champagne can be not so good. It has to be very sparkling, very happy and it shouldn't be too serious. Sometimes people say that it is vulgar, but I think it is just pure happiness. At the end of the nineteenth century with the Moulin Rouge and that kind of dance it is not vulgar it's just simple happiness. That's something I really like about this movement. And the last movement, well it's crazy. It's one of the fastest in the whole repertoire. It's spectacular with all the arpeggios and scales.

It's a very efficient piece and from a musical point of view I think it is very well written for the piano and the orchestra. The dialogue and the balance between the orchestra and the piano is absolutely wonderful to play.

MT: Congratulations on being selected to be part of the BBC New Generation of Artists Series. Do you feel any pressure or responsibility for attracting new audiences to classical?

CT: I don't feel the pressure that much and I have to say that in concert halls I meet people of all generations. Of course there are a lot in their 60s 70s 80s and even older perhaps, but I also have a lot of young people coming to the concerts as well. I'm not desperate about this although it is true that we have to think of a new way to communicate about classical music just to make people realize that classical music is not elitist and it is really for everyone. I think it's just a matter of realizing that classical music is around all the time, when you go to the cinema, when you watch television. It's there all the time and young people, when they have a chance to discover it, I have never heard anyone say, oh I don't like it. Especially live, when it happens in front of them when they are close to the piano in school or before or after a concert. I think it's wonderful when you can say, just look inside the piano and see the way that it works. That always makes a huge impression on people.

MT: Along these lines I was reading about the recital you gave in Australia with Domenico Clario. Will you talk about that a little bit?

CT: That was really amazing and actually we wanted to, well, shock the audience because people didn't know what to expect when they came and actually there were not enough chairs for everyone in the hall. So some people had to stand, but we wanted them to move around and follow the painter and get close to the piano. So I think when it comes to bringing in new audiences, we can play a little bit with [this kind of format]. Of course when we play in places like Carnegie Hall then it is more complicated, but in smaller places I think it is possible to think of a new way to play the concerts.

MT: It sounded fascinating to me and I wish I had been there. I have enjoyed listening to the recordings that you have on-line, especially the Chopin Ballade — what a beautiful sound you have.

CT: Thank you — and since we were talking about painting, I think as a musician I have to use the sound like a painter with a brush, who has to create special colors. It is exactly the same for me. The tone, the sound itself is not a goal, it's just a tool. I really worked a lot when I was a teenager on this aspect. At the time I thought it was the only thing that was important but I was wrong. But at least now I know how to use it.

The piano is a wonderful instrument, it can produce so many different kind of sounds. Sometimes people say wow, we didn't expect a piano to be so soft, for example, and I say it's like an alchemy, trying to make gold from the piano.

MT: That's very interesting. And speaking of sounds and colors, something that caught my attention was your extensive discography, as well as your list of concertos. There are so many different styles of music and all I could think of was the range of sounds that are needed to play them.

CT: That is true. And while it is my own sound it's true that you have to adapt it to the repertoire that you are playing. For example, when I play classical period music like Beethoven, especially when I played his complete violin sonatas with Alina Ibragimova, I had to think about what she did with her instrument. Her approach was very classical, not romantic, and I had to at times find a little dryer sound. And to think without too much emotion. It's a very fine balance.

MT: Final question; When did you start playing and when did you know you wanted to be a musician?

CT: I started when I was five and at the beginning it was just a hobby. My parents knew a piano teacher and she was really nice to me and liked me very much, but I just enjoyed it and that was the main point. My parents never pushed me but I really enjoyed it very much from the beginning.

But deciding to make a job of it? It's really hard to say because, well especially when you're a kid you have no idea of what it means. I said to my teacher when I was seven or eight, I wanted to be the world champion of the piano, but that didn't really mean any-

thing. I think I realized that it could be a serious thing when I was sixteen or seventeen. I was already working a lot playing in different little concerts, then one day I had a complete recital with a complete program and I thought, well, this is my first recital and I felt it very much that this was the first and many more would happen in the future.

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