

Preview

Cleveland Orchestra MLK Celebration: a conversation with Sphinx Competition laureate, cellist Lev Mamuya

by Mike Telin



On Sunday, January 19, beginning at 7:00 p.m. in Severance Hall The Cleveland Orchestra, under the direction of Chelsea Tipton, will perform its 34th annual concert in celebration of the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. The concert will feature the 165-member volunteer Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration Chorus, prepared by William Henry Caldwell. Although the concert is sold out, the performance will be broadcast live on WCLV (104.9 FM) and WCPN (90.3 FM). A free Prelude Concert begins at 6 p.m. performed by members of the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra.

In keeping with recent tradition, Sunday's concert also features a laureate of the [Sphinx Competition](#) as soloist. "I'm definitely excited," sixteen year-old cellist Lev Mamuya, said during a recent telephone conversation. "Obviously getting a chance to work with an orchestra like The Cleveland Orchestra is amazing and I'm looking forward to learning a lot."

For his debut, Mamuya (pronounced MA-mu-ya) will perform the first movement of Luigi Boccherini's Cello Concerto in B-flat major, a work he performed on his way to winning First Place in the Junior Division at the 2013 Sphinx Competition. "It's a great piece and I've performed a couple of times," says Mamuya, although he does admit the work presents some challenges. "Of course there are technical challenges, but you also need to be musically expressive. I've heard it so many times so I try to make it sound fresh while communicating musical ideas," adding that making a work sound fresh is something that players are continuously faced with when performing pieces that are so well-known to audiences.

A junior at The Roxbury Latin School in West Roxbury, Massachusetts, Lev Mamuya has an impressive list of accomplishments for a young man of sixteen years. To hear an example of his musical prowess, [click here](#) to watch a video of his final round performance during last year's Sphinx Competition. He gave his first solo recital at age five and appeared as a soloist with the Cape Cod Symphony at age eight. He won the Newton Symphony concerto competition in 2007. In 2008, he appeared as a soloist on the PBS radio show "From the Top" as well as on the TV program "From the Top at Carnegie Hall."

I asked Mamuya to tell me about the Sphinx Competition requirements. “The first step is to record a DVD. You chose the music from a list of competition required repertoire.” The 2014 competition requirements for the Cello Junior division are 2 contrasting movements of a Bach Cello Suite, the finale of Lalo's *Concerto in D Minor*, and a piece of the contestant's choice. “Then ten semi-finalists in each the junior and senior division are invited to Detroit. Everyone stays for about a week and it's a very comprehensive experience. There are master classes and lectures that everyone is required to attend. Then the ten will play and they choose three finalists who then play their concerto with the Sphinx Orchestra, which is comprised of top Black and Latino professional players from around the country.”

Mamuya is a student of Michael Reynolds at the New England Conservatory with whom he has studied for five years. “It's been a great partnership. Whenever I go to him with either a technical or musical issue that I'm having problems with he always helps me fix it. Although we have musical discussions, he doesn't force me down one path or another, he allows me a lot of freedom of choice.”

He has also attended the prestigious [Perlman Music Program](#). Does he enjoy the intensity of programs like Perlman? “Yes I do. I just returned from their winter residency in Sarasota. And yes, I do enjoy the comprehensiveness of playing orchestral music, chamber music and solo repertoire. It's a nice opportunity to just focus and get a lot done. Especially after the school year is over.”

"We also all sing in a chorus as well. I think it's a good philosophy that singing will help us with to be more musical when playing our instruments. Everyone — students, counselors and faculty — all participate. “We have rehearsals every day and orchestra concerts also include performances by the chorus. It's a good experience especially in terms of everyone coming together. But also in terms of teaching you things about musicality that you might not learn just from playing.”

While at Perlman, Mamuya studied with Ron Leonard. “He's very demanding but I accomplished a lot.” He also enjoyed chamber music coaching's with Cavani Quartet cellist Merry Peckham as well as having Itzak Perlman as the orchestra conductor.

An intense experience yes, but Mamuya says the students still had time to have fun — that is when they were not responsible for Kitchen Patrol. “After meals four people have to wash the dishes, sweep the floor of the cafeteria and rinse off the tables and man the industrial dishwasher.” When I tell him he's acquired even more marketable skills he laughs. “Yes, exactly!”

Lev Mamuya is supported by [Project Step](#) and was named the Kanter Kallman Scholar for the 2010-2011 academic year. “The Kanter Kallman Scholar is only for one year but Project Step is a continuing chamber music program for young Black and Latino musicians. I play chamber music and have rehearsals and coachings every Saturday.” The program also provides private lessons as well as large ensemble experiences.

He says that playing chamber music is something he truly enjoys. “It is my favorite thing to do.” He says he is very fond of the quartets of Bartók and Beethoven. “On a very basic listening level, I find them very compelling pieces of music. I have also having taken the-

ory and composition for a number of years and being able to look at the quartets more in depth, they are very intelligently written. They're very nice paradigms for what a quartet can be." An accomplished composer, Mamuya says he began studying composition because of a personal interest. "I started when I was pretty young, maybe around ten years ago."

Although he does plan to continue his musical education in college, he says he is most interested in schools that offer both academic and conservatory options. "There are a couple of schools still in discussion but I can say that I'm looking at joint programs between colleges and conservatories, so we'll see."

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