

Preview

**CMA Masters of the Violin —
catching up with Ray Chen**

by Mike Telin



“It’s always a great pleasure to return to a place and to continue to build a relationship with the audience,” violinist Ray Chen told us during a recent telephone conversation. “That’s what I believe performing is about, it’s the connections to the audience.”

On Wednesday, February 12 beginning at 7:30 pm in the Cleveland Museum of Art's Gartner Auditorium, Ray Chen returns to Cleveland as part of [CMA's Performing Arts Series](#), Masters of the Violin. Pianist Julio Elizade joins Chen in performances of Mozart's *Sonata in A, K. 305* and Sarasate's *Habanera, Playera, and Zigeunerweisen*, as well as Beethoven's *Sonata No. 9, "Kreutzer."*

Born in Taiwan and raised in Australia, Ray Chen studied at the Curtis Institute of Music. Following wins at the Yehudi Menuhin (2008) and Queen Elisabeth (2009) competitions, Chen's international career has been on a fast track forward. You can read about his accomplishments and numerous other interests on his [website](#).

Chen, who turns 25 the beginning of March, most recently performed in Cleveland last summer, making his debut with the Cleveland Orchestra at Blossom. But Cleveland also played an important role during his formative years. “I went to the Encore School for Strings in 2006 and 2007 and I attended some concerts at Blossom. I remember hearing Christian Tetzlaff play the Tchaikovsky *Violin Concerto* and the second half was *Scheherazade*. I still remember that concert very much. So there is even more of a personal connection when you go back to the places you have been as a student.”

For Wednesday's program, Chen says he's trying something a little different, “I'm beginning with the Mozart sonata, but this time I chose to dive right into the show pieces during the first half, and the entire second half is the Beethoven. I think it is more like a symphonic approach to the programming. The 'Kreutzer', while it is not in four movements, has a symphonic kind of feeling.” Chen admits that going straight into the show pieces is

sort of like winning the audience over by serving the dessert first, “but people do love Sarasate and they know they know they can look forward to a more serious side of music on the second half.”

He says that the “Kreutzer” too is an audience favorite. “I think it’s because it is so passionate. It has virtuosity but even more so it has this intense emotional feeling. It’s just broiling all the time. And I really enjoy playing it. This will only be my second time of playing this program. The first time I was a little worried, having relied on a tried and true programming system of beginning with a smaller sonata then moving to a more heavy sonata and saving the lighter fare for the second half. But I just did it in Italy and was very pleased with the audience reaction. I like the approach and I think it’s working.”

Does Chen think Sarasate was a great composer or did he simply know how to write really fun music? “That’s an interesting question and my immediate reaction is yes, of course he’s a great composer. But that’s because I’m comparing Sarasate’s style with that of Paganini and Wieniawski — music for the violin that is what Liszt and Chopin are to the piano. But I think Sarasate is more like Chopin and Liszt would be more like Paganini.

“You’re right that Sarasate’s works are fun and great pieces, but of course they are in that showpiece category. And sometimes I do feel that because pieces are well loved we often have to defend ourselves when we want to play them. The same is true with the Mendelssohn concerto, I’m waiting for the blow when someone says, ‘why doesn’t he play something different, more interesting?’ As a young artist you’re always expecting that but you do know that I’m not somebody who plays something I don’t like.”

A major part of establishing a career for a violinist is finding the right collaborator. “Julio Elizalde is a brilliant pianist,” Chen says, “and I really like the guy as a person as well. It’s not always easy to find someone who you like both as a person and as a musician.” Chen was first introduced to Elizalde by the famed violin teacher and chamber music coach Lewis Kaplan, who was a member of the jury at the 2009 Queen Elisabeth Competition.

“What I love about Julio is that he is a strong pianist and he is his own person, he’s not like ‘The Accompanist’. I don’t want someone who’s just going to say ‘yes, sir’ all the time. Many times in rehearsal he’ll say, ‘dude, are you really going to do that?’ [laughing] He’ll just say something like that and it’s great! I learn so much about my own playing. It’s practically like a coaching, but we both learn so much together. And we achieve a combined level that we would not be able to achieve by ourselves.”

Talking to Ray Chen is like having a conversation with a college chum at a reunion. Although he had arrived in Cleveland from Belgium two hours earlier, he picked up where we left off from last summer’s conversation. “Brussels” he says, “it’s a special place for me because that’s where it all started back in 2009 with the Queen Elisabeth Competition. So it’s always kind of like a nostalgic, homecoming feeling.”

And there’s that part about being accessible to audiences, “People have a certain image in their minds of who you are based on the things you have done. I think at this point Face-

book is a great way for me to make sure that the image people have of me comes directly from me.”

And this week some local students will have the opportunity to get to know Ray Chen in person. Why? “Somebody asked me on Facebook,” Chen said. “A student at Solon High School wrote to me saying, 'I know you're super busy, but would you have the time to come to our school?' and I said sure, why not? This is all about beings accessible and to me it's really important. Obviously you can't do everything”, Chen said, pointing out that most outreach is arranged through the presenters, “but in this case, we're doing it ourselves and it's great!”

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