

Preview

Cleveland Chamber Symphony's NEOSonicFest debuts with six concerts from March 28 through April 6

by Mike Telin



Since its founding in 1980 by the late composer and Cleveland State University professor Edwin London (left), the Cleveland Chamber Symphony has remained true to its core mission of performing and promoting new music that “dares to explore”. This week the Grammy Award-winning orchestra enters a new phase in its life when it takes on the role of organizer and host of [NEOSonicFest](#), a festival of new music.

“We’re very excited about it,” said Cleveland Chamber Symphony music director Steven Smith during a recent telephone conversation. “We’ve been thinking about how to keep the name and activities of CCS alive over the past several years. We thought the idea of concentrating our activities into a specific period of time would give a greater focus on what CCS does.”

NEOSonicFest opens on Friday, March 28 at 7:30 pm in Cleveland State University's Drinko Hall, when Steven Smith leads the Cleveland Chamber Symphony in a program that features Ed London’s *Melodrama* and *Federico’s Follies*. The concert also includes Geoffrey Peterson’s *The Edmund Fitzgerald*, a concerto for piano and strings with Nicholas Underhill as soloist, and special guests Verb Ballets, Richard Dickinson, choreographer.

Smith said that it didn’t take long for the CCS board and staff to realize that the festival idea was a wonderful opportunity to present concerts that bring together the numerous performers and ensembles that are involved in new music in Northeast Ohio. “There is a lot going on in the area that people perhaps are unaware of.” Smith points out that although this year’s festival does not include everyone in the area engaged in new music, it does include many of the performers and ensembles. “We hope the festival will raise awareness of the thriving nature of new music and creativity that exists throughout the region.”

Friday’s concert titled *A Tribute to Ed London* includes two of the late prolific composer’s works, but why these two? “There are a ton of pieces but unfortunately a lot of his music is not easily obtainable,” Smith said. “Peters was his primary publisher, but there are many works that are either unpublished or published by smaller entities. I spent some

time poking through the archives of both the Chamber Symphony and Ed's personal archives that are housed at Cleveland State, and they are in need of some major cataloguing work."

And, as with all programming, there are budgetary considerations. "Ed did some wonderful projects. He wrote a couple of fantastic operas and some big choral and orchestral pieces, but at this point those are beyond our financial scope. So we had to try to look for pieces that were a little more manageable and were easily available to us."



Smith (above) gives credit to CCS flutist Sean Gabriel for the selection of *Melodrama*. "We did it with Sean a couple of years ago, and he had previously done it with Ed." Smith himself "came across" *Federico's Follies*. "I didn't know it at all. It was written for the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players and I thought that this might be a Cleveland premiere. But as Sean was looking at his part, he seemed to think that it had been performed in Cleveland before."

The opening concert also continues the artistic collaboration between CCS and Verb Ballets with a performance of Geoffrey Peterson's *The Edmund Fitzgerald*, a work Smith describes as a "beautiful piece, very dramatic, very haunting and it is a suitable tribute to the memory of the men who served on the ship. It's going to take on a slightly different life in this performance with the addition of Verb Ballets. I'm very excited to present it in this new light. We've worked together several times now. They try to do in the dance world what we try to do in the music world, constantly looking for new things and as our tag line says, music that dares to explore."

Smith also believes the collaboration is one that Ed London would enjoy. "I think it's the kind of thing that Ed loved, this mixing of ideas, stirring things up and creating fascinating new connections."

The final NEOSonicFest concert also features a program near and dear to Ed London, the annual Young and Emerging Composers concert. "Clint Needham, who is coordinating the concert, has been through that program and it's wonderful to see how he has grown and progressed," Smith said. "He's very well known in the music world and we're delighted he is in town at Baldwin Wallace University."

"In addition to serving on the CCS board, Clint has taken an active role in spearheading and continuing the Young and Emerging program. It's important to encourage young composers and give them the opportunity to hear the music they're writing. That's how you learn."

ClevelandClassical will continue its coverage of NEOSonicFest with the following series of previews for each of the festival's six concerts:

Wednesday, March 26 – Richard Dickinson of Verb Ballets & Ensemble HD and Cleveland Orchestra Principal Flutist, Joshua Smith (Concert: Sunday, March 30 at 7:30 in Drinko Hall at CSU)

Thursday, March 27 – Organist Jonathan Moyer (Concert: Monday, March 31 at 7:30 at the Church of the Covenant)

Saturday, March 29 – Saxophonist Howie Smith (Concert: Wednesday, April 2 at 8:00 in Drinko Hall at CSU)

Sunday, March 30 – John HC Thompson from Five/One Experimental Orchestra (Concert on Saturday, April 5 at 8:30 at the Screw Factory in Lakewood)

Monday, April 1 – Clint Needham (Concert on Sunday, April 6 at 7:30 in Gamble Auditorium at Baldwin Wallace)

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