

Cleveland Orchestra: Mary Kay Fink to premiere new piccolo concerto by Gabriela Lena Frank

by Mike Telin



“As a child, I loved classic fairy tales as collected and told by the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, and others,” American composer Gabriela Lena Frank writes about her new work, *Will-o’-the-Wisp: Tone Poem for Piccolo and Orchestra*. “As a composer, I’ve often enjoyed using some of my childish and fancifully personalized re-interpretations of myths to inspire pieces, with varying degrees of overt Latin American musical (especially indigenous Indian) influences. [And this] is one such piece.” On Thursday, May 1 beginning at 7:30 pm in Severance Hall, Cleveland Orchestra Principal Piccolo Mary Kay Fink performs the world premiere of Frank’s new concerto under the direction of David Robertson.

Will-o’-the-Wisp was commissioned by The Cleveland Orchestra for Mary Kay Fink, although finding a composer for the project turned out to be a long process. “I was working with the artistic administrators of the orchestra. I would suggest a composer and they would make suggestions back to me,” Fink said in a recent telephone conversation. “We approached a few composers who turned down the offer because they were too busy.”

As luck would have it, Fink attended a recital given by Canton Symphony principal flutist Katherine DeJongh which included a piece by Gabriela Lena Frank. “I had not heard of Frank and was unfamiliar with her music,” Fink recalled, “but I loved her piece. It was my favorite work on the recital.”

After listening to more of her music, Fink suggested the composer to the orchestra’s artistic administrator, who thought Frank was a great choice. “Luckily, Gabriela loved the idea of writing a piccolo concerto. It took us a while to get there but I’m very happy that

it is she and I can't wait to meet her. She's been really great to work with and has been extremely accommodating."

After receiving the music and working on it for some time, Fink said there was one fast technical passage covering three octaves that was not possible to play as originally written. "I contacted her and she was great and made some adjustments so that the fast tempo could stay intact."

The concerto is roughly 15 minutes in duration and calls for a medium-size orchestra: a large percussion section, woodwinds and strings including a prominent solo violin part. The work is written in two movements, *Humble Song*, *Song Humble* and *Will-o'-the-Wisp* that are played without pause. "I can't wait to hear it with the orchestra. Gabriela uses a lot of interesting colors and effects like bowed marimbas — I believe the idea is for it to sound like giant panpipes. So I am looking forward to hearing it with all of the colors because I think that is an important aspect of the work."

Frank, whose mother is Peruvian, is influenced by that country's music. "She also has a fascination with fairy tales, especially Peruvian fairy tales," Fink said, pointing out that a *Will-o'-the-Wisp* is a flickering light in the sky and is found in many fairy tales. "You hear a little bit of Peruvian influence although I wouldn't say a lot. I am especially pleased that Gabriela's piece does not fall back in any way on the two prominent piccolo stereotypes. Nothing in the concerto sounds like a march or a tweeting bird."

Mary Kay Fink joined The Cleveland Orchestra's flute section in 1990 and made her Cleveland Orchestra debut as piccolo soloist in Vivaldi's *Concerto in A minor* at the 1994 Blossom Festival. Her most recent solo appearance was in April 2005, performing Bruce Broughton's *Piccolo Concerto*. However, looking back at her undergraduate years, becoming a professional piccolo player was the furthest thing from her mind.

"When I was at Oberlin I really didn't like the piccolo, in fact if I could trade parts with somebody else, I did." Then after earning her master's degree at the Juilliard School the realities of needing to find a job led Fink straight to the piccolo. "There was a position open in the New Jersey Symphony that required you to play second flute, piccolo and assistant principal as needed."

Fink admits that at the time the piccolo she was using was not the best. "I was playing on a very old silver Haynes piccolo — not the greatest instrument, but somehow I pulled it together and I pretty much learned how to play the instrument on the job." After switching to a much better instrument, today she plays an older model Powell. Fink said that she now really loves the piccolo.

What does Fink see as the challenge of playing the piccolo in an orchestra? “Many times you have to sit for a very long time, the same as brass players, and then you have to make an entrance in a very difficult passage. That is a challenge of the job. In one sense you have to be very calm, and you need a certain amount of courage because if you are tense in any way you will be out of tune and not blend. And over a period of time I have learned to be comfortable.”

Mary Kay Fink is also interested in music of other cultures. During her undergraduate studies she saw a sign recruiting musicians for a Chinese Music Ensemble. “I thought, that sounds like fun and I could use two credits,” she said with a laugh. “So I signed up and learned how to play the bamboo flute and it was a blast. I just loved it and the sound the instrument makes is so great.”

Fink carried her interest in Bamboo Flute to New York. “The instructor at Oberlin introduced me to his flute teacher who was born in mainland China and was living there during the Cultural Revolution. He eventually fled to Hong Kong by swimming for six hours. He finally came to New York and was working as a taxi driver, He was one of the best flutists I have ever heard. He was like the Julius Baker of the bamboo flute. He didn’t speak any English so the lessons were very challenging. I also played in his ensemble, where I was the only westerner.”

Fink has also had some fun opportunities to perform on folk instruments in the orchestra. “I got to play pan pipes and Irish whistle when we played *Lord of the Rings*. I also played Irish whistle during a Holiday Concert. Again, it was fun and a different kind of challenge but I do like that kind of thing. I also play Baroque flute and I did take Irish flute lessons on the West Side but I’ve never played in a group, I just did it for fun.”

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