

Preview: Cleveland Orchestra Family Concert — The Composer is Dead

by Mike Telin



The Composer is Dead, a funny musical whodunit by children’s author Lemony Snicket and composer Nathaniel Stookey (left) that “investigates” every section of the orchestra, returns to Severance Hall on Friday, May 16 beginning at 7:30 pm when Brett Mitchell will lead The Cleveland Orchestra in a special Family Concert. The concert features the composer as narrator.

Since its premiere with the San Francisco Symphony in 2006, the piece has quickly become a hit with audiences and orchestras across North America. Prior to the work’s Cleveland Orchestra premiere in April 2010, we had the opportunity to speak to Nathaniel Stookey by phone from his home in San Francisco. The engaging composer told us about his ties to Cleveland as well as the series of “fortunate events” that led to the commissioning of *The Composer is Dead*. The following is an excerpt from that interview.

Mike Telin: Have you ever worked with the Cleveland Orchestra before now?

Nathaniel Stookey: Only as an usher during the 1988-1989 season while I was a student at the Cleveland Institute of Music studying with Donald Erb. So other than that no, I have not worked with them. But I am very excited about this opportunity.

MT: When the San Francisco Symphony approached you to write The Composer is Dead, what did they ask you to produce?

NS: It really came about in a little more complicated way than that, and I can tell you an abridged version of the story. I was working on another piece with the San Francisco Symphony called *Out of the Everywhere*. I had recently moved home to San Francisco, where I grew up. Daniel Handler, aka Lemony Snicket, had also recently moved back. He and I were friends in high school, but had not seen each other in twenty years.

Then we ran into each other at a street corner where he was sitting outside a café talking to someone who I assumed was his wife or business partner. We exchanged a bit of small talk and our phone numbers, then I got on the streetcar with my son and that was that.

The next day I got a call from Edwin Outwater, the resident conductor of the symphony at the time, and the first words out of his mouth were, “You know Lemony Snicket?” And I said “No, who’s Lemony Snicket?” He said, “Go get the arts section of the *Chronicle*”, so I did, and apparently the person David was sitting with the day before was a journalist interviewing him for an article.

Although I had only introduced myself by my first name, the article said that Lemony Snicket has just moved back home, and lo and behold, his old high school buddy named Nathaniel, who’s a composer, has also just moved back home. Because there just aren’t that many composers named Nathaniel, Edwin put two and two together. He told me about Lemony Snicket, and that the symphony was trying to get him to narrate *Peter and the Wolf*.

So I acted as an intermediary there, and *Peter and the Wolf* was a huge success. From that point on, Daniel and I started talking about doing our own version of the Prokofiev. So it really was more of a matter of things coming together, rather than the symphony asking us to produce a specific thing. We pitched it to them and since I was already working with the symphony and now Daniel was also working with them, it all came together very neatly.

MT: What a wonderful story.

NS: It is a great story. Daniel and I have been friends again ever since. I was only in school with him for one year, and while we had been friends, we hadn’t really known each other that well and then we didn’t see each other for twenty years. It’s been a good thing for both of us to come home and not only reconnect with an old friend, but someone who is also the ideal collaborator. We’re batting ideas around for future collaborations, perhaps an opera.

MT: That would be great. You have said in interviews that you wanted to write a piece for people of your own generation as well as for your own kids. You also talk about the pigeonholing of repertoire like this. If you could be king of the orchestra world for a day, where would you like to see this piece eventually find its place in the repertoire?

NS: I would like to see it played for adult audiences as much as it is for young audiences. It has been done a couple of times as a cabaret piece. Like you said, it is a piece that was written as much for people of my generation, or any generation, as it is for children. The idea is for it to be something that resonates for children, but is not off-putting to their

parents. [Daniel and I] both have young children and are not keen on the sort of kiddie concert fare you usually hear. We wanted something that was going to be appealing, engaging and exciting to anyone, regardless of their age.

MT: I am so happy to hear you say that, because I think the piece can stand up to just about anything.

NS: Thank you. We did take it seriously. We did not treat it as a throwaway piece just because it was going to be primarily directed at young people. I invested just as much into this piece as I do into a “serious” piece.

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