

Preview: Cleveland Orchestra — Stanislaw Skrowaczewski to return to Blossom this weekend after three decades

by Daniel Hathaway



In 1957, Polish conductor Stanislaw Skrowaczewski was one of the local hosts for The Cleveland Orchestra's first European tour — an event which established the ensemble's international reputation. It was also an important moment for Skrowaczewski, whose first meeting with George Szell in Warsaw launched his own career in the United States.

This Sunday, July 20 at 7:00 pm, Skrowaczewski will return to the Blossom Music Center to conduct the Orchestra in Weber's *Freischütz Overture*, Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 27* with Italian pianist Francesco Piemontesi, and Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 5*.

Back to that first encounter with Szell. "It was just after I won first prize in Rome," Skrowaczewski said in a telephone conversation from his home in the Minneapolis suburb of Wayzata. "That was important in Europe because it was the first international competition after the war, so it had a certain value. Szell knew it, and he knew a little of my composition, *Symphony for Strings*, which he thought was very well written. He asked if I would mind to play it with his orchestra in Cleveland next year. The arrangements were very simple."

Simple indeed, but full of future possibilities. "In 1958, I was the first person from a communist country to enter the United States for conducting. It went very well, apparently, because they re-invited me for the next season," an occasion on which the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* ran a front page review under the headline, "Polish Conductor Electrifies Severance Hall." Skrowaczewski has had a continuous relationship with The Cleveland Orchestra ever since.

In 1959, Skrowaczewski also impressed audiences in other cities. “A big manager at the time arranged additional concerts with the New York Philharmonic, the Cincinnati Symphony, the Philadelphia Orchestra and others,” he said. “Then the Minneapolis Symphony, who had lost Dorati, proposed me to be music director in 1960.”

More than fifty years later, Skrowaczewski vividly remembers the difficulties of living and working as an artist under the communist regime in Poland. “It was impossible for musicians and composers. We couldn’t conduct whole areas of contemporary music, including Stravinsky. When we left, it was almost an escape,” he said.

“In February of 1960, my wife couldn’t get a passport to accompany me to Amsterdam for four weeks of conducting until a few hours before my train departed. The first phone call of the morning was from her. ‘I am free!’ Once we crossed the border in Hanover we just took a very deep breath and my wife said, ‘never more back.’”

The Skrowaczewskis found a very different situation in America. “We loved the United States, especially beginning with the election of John F. Kennedy as president, when culture began to bloom here.” One of Skrowaczewski’s guest conducting engagements in Cleveland took place the week after Kennedy was assassinated. “I was so distressed and moved that I really couldn’t concentrate on the music. As a newcomer, I adored Kennedy, so it was a big blow to me.”

In Minneapolis, Skrowaczewski found fertile soil in which to further develop a fine orchestra. “We built a wonderful concert hall after ten years of difficult acoustics. There was a certain amount of luck because it all depended on how they liked me. After a year they could have said, thank you very much, it was very nice, but goodbye.”



Skrowaczewski with the Minnesota Orchestra. MinnPost photo by John Whiting.

That obviously didn't happen, for Stanislaw Skrowaczewski spent nineteen years as music director of what is now the Minnesota Orchestra, after which he was named its laureate conductor. That title wasn't just an honorific. Skrowaczewski recently figured prominently in the orchestra's continuing history. "During the terrible lockout of the orchestra for more than one year, the musicians used me for benefit concerts. I reopened the new season in February because Osmo Vänskä wasn't available. I was very happy to go back to my old orchestra. I've had a very nice continuous relationship with them."

I ask Skrowaczewski about his secrets for building a great orchestra. "O my dear," he said. "That's impossible. You simply have to choose, if you can, the right material of musicians, then you have to deal wisely to try to correct certain things and propose certain things, and then to make rehearsals clear with very precise, understandable and possible demands. I worked steadily with the Minneapolis orchestra for the first eight seasons. The hall was bad then, but the stage was OK for working. I couldn't care less about the hall because I couldn't help that, but I could help the orchestra on the stage.

"Also, in the 60s there were very few guest conductors. For my debut in Cleveland in 1958, I was probably the only guest conductor that whole season. Music directors conducted up to twenty programs a year with one orchestra. Then the jet era started around 1958 and that changed everything. More and more young conductors were eager to take two or three orchestras, which was crazy. It's impossible to learn and understand the repertoire deeply enough for so many performances. There's not much chance to leave your own stamp. So I concentrated on developing the orchestra for my first eight years. I took advantage of the situation."

Having just marked his ninetieth birthday "in a very small celebration," Skrowaczewski brushes off having achieved that landmark. "What does it mean to be older?" But he has enjoyed a few meaningful tributes, one of them in Tokyo, where he appeared last October with the Yomiuri Nippon Symphony Orchestra. "On my birthday, I was presented with a huge album of 28 recordings I did with the Deutsche Radio Philharmonic in Saarbrücken. It was an incredible, beautiful gift that included all eleven Bruckner symphonies — I also did '0' and '00' — Bartók, the Chopin piano concertos. I'm listening to all of them this summer."

The Cleveland Orchestra chose to mark Skrowaczewski's 90th year at Blossom this weekend by inviting him to revisit Shostakovich's fifth symphony, a work he conducted in his debut concert at Severance Hall in 1958. "They asked for it," he said. "With this orchestra, I know there will be no problems. It's been thirty-two years since I was at Blossom. I'll tell them I hope it won't be thirty-two years before I come again!"

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