

Brett Mitchell Makes Official Debut at Blossom with Kent/Blossom Chamber Orchestra

By Daniel Hautzinger



Brett Mitchell has had an eventful summer. He just got married and moved into a new house, and last weekend he made his debut at the Blossom Music Center, stepping in for Stanislaw Skrowaczewski to conduct The Cleveland Orchestra (TCO) after Skrowaczewski cancelled shortly before the concert because of illness. And on July 26, Mitchell returns to Blossom for what he thought would be his debut there, conducting the Kent/Blossom Chamber Orchestra in a prelude concert at 7:00.

That concert will be followed at 8:00 by John Storgårds conducting TCO in Beethoven's *Fidelio* Overture and Liszt's First Piano Concerto with Stephen Hough. Finally, the jam-packed night will end with the Kent/Blossom Chamber Orchestra, who are students at the Kent/Blossom Music Festival, and TCO in a side-by-side performance of Sibelius's Second Symphony led by Storgårds.

Things have come full circle for Mitchell, whose first time working with TCO "was back in the summer of 2009, when they hired me to be a cover conductor for a couple of their guest conductors at Blossom," he said last week over the phone while on the way to lunch in between rehearsals. Last fall, he became assistant conductor of the orchestra. So a debut at Blossom is fitting.

"It's a fantastic venue," he enthused. "I was just stunned back in 2009, the first time I was there. It's probably three times the size of Severance Hall — there are something like 5,000 seats — and yet the sound is fantastic. That's absolutely astonishing to me."

Because the acoustics at Blossom are so remarkable, Mitchell plans to focus on balancing the sound of a chamber orchestra. "I'm not as concerned about the outdoor space part of it as I am about making sure a chamber orchestra still sounds how it needs to sound in that great big amphitheater out there. That's actually one of the great educational aspects

of this for the young musicians, since we do all of our rehearsals at Kent State until the day of the concert. That's going to require really great ears on the part of the students to adjust to the acoustic."

Mitchell is no stranger to working with students. Besides being assistant conductor of TCO, he is also music director of the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra. "This concert will be a nice treat though," he said, "because the COYO musicians are principally high school age, and the Kent/Blossom musicians are primarily university age. It will be kind of a nice bridge between my two full-time jobs."

Some challenges come with that treat though, as the students in the Kent/Blossom Chamber Orchestra will be entirely new to him. "It's kind of like going on a first date. Every time you work with an orchestra for the first time, you hope that there will be great chemistry and that things will click. You do everything in advance to make sure that your end of the bargain goes as well as it possibly can. You always get those first date jitters a little bit and hope it will work well.

Another way in which this concert is a fitting official debut for Mitchell is the repertoire. "Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll* is one of the very first pieces I conducted. I think I was something like twenty years old," he recalled. "It also happens to be perfect for an outdoor venue because the piece takes most of its music from Act III of the opera *Siegfried*, and for most of that act Siegfried is outdoors."

The *Siegfried Idyll* will be followed by Ravel's orchestration of four movements from his six movement piano suite *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, which includes many difficult oboe solos. When I joked that the student oboe player in the Kent/Blossom Chamber Orchestra is probably simultaneously cursing and thanking him for choosing the piece, he laughed. "My recollection of being a young musician is that there is a lot of simultaneous cursing and thanking. One never quite feels ready for the opportunities one is given, but sometimes you just need to get thrown into the deep end." Last weekend Mitchell probably knew exactly how that oboist feels.

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