

**Cleveland Orchestra: fifteen minutes  
with mezzo-soprano Karen Cargill**

by Daniel Hathaway



Scottish mezzo-soprano Karen Cargill will be featured in Hector Berlioz's song cycle *Les nuits d'été* this weekend at Severance Hall with guest conductor Robin Ticciati and The Cleveland Orchestra. Cargill and Ticciati have recorded the Berlioz with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, an album that received critical acclaim when it was released in April 2013. We spoke with the affable mezzo by telephone in her dressing room at Severance Hall on Tuesday morning, where she was listening in on a rehearsal of Schumann's *Rhenish Symphony*.

*Daniel Hathaway: Welcome to Cleveland! Is this your first visit to our fair city?*

Karen Cargill: It is indeed, and I couldn't be more thrilled to be here with this orchestra. It's been a dream of mine to sing with them, and I'm so excited this week, I really, truly am. I've actually come in this morning just to listen to the Schumann rehearsal because I want to hear just how fabulous they are before I work with them.

*DH: Congratulations on the critical response to your Berlioz recording with Robin Ticciati.*

KC: Thank you. It was an absolute joy to record — a real labor of love for both of us. It was a long dream of ours to make that work and I'm so delighted that people have enjoyed it.

*DH: I'm sure it's also provided some wonderful rehearsal time for the upcoming concert.*

KC: Indeed it has. We know the songs so intimately now. It's a complex work. It's one of those works that's like an onion, really: the more you peel the more you discover. It will be another exploration while I'm here.

*DH: You're well known for your Mahler interpretations. What appeals to you about Berlioz?*

KC: I'm in love with the French language. I'm a romantic at heart, and it appeals to me from that perspective, but I think Berlioz sets so well for the voice, particularly for the mezzo. He really understands the instrument. The extremities of the voice are explored as well as the middle of the range. What really appeals to me is that he wants to show off the breadth of the instrument — but in an emotional way, not just in a musical way, if you understand what I mean by that. The way that he writes has such depth to it, and he sets the language so beautifully — like no other French composer except Debussy.

*DH: Has Berlioz been kind to the singer in his orchestration? He can pile on a lot of instruments at times.*

KC: Yes, he really can, but I find that in the thicker orchestration, the voice is integrated into the orchestra rather than the traditional thing of the soloist soaring above. It's part of the texture, and that's important for me. I love to actually be part of the orchestra rather than just standing at the front. That's such a key part of music-making for me, and I think Berlioz writes so well for that experience.

*DH: You said in an interview with Kate Molleson of the Scottish Herald that "Robin Ticciati has a wonderful, wide-eyed freshness in his interpretations." Could you expand on that a bit?*

KC: I think he just wants to experience and explore everything. During rehearsals, he wants to see what other possibilities there are. He'll ask things of me that I would never have thought of before. I try them, and it works, and vice versa. We both try to get at the heart of what the composer wanted, to make the text speak as immediately as it should do. That's what I love about him: this enthusiasm to discover. I think that's what music should be, a discovery every time. We shouldn't necessarily become comfortable in a piece.

*DH: So there may be a surprise or two!*

KC: There should be! I hope so, Dan. That's what keeps me alive in this job. It should be a school day every day. There should be something we experience for the first time. It may be, as I said to Kate Molleson, a feeling in the air, it may be a resonance in the hall, it could be something someone in the orchestra played that you haven't quite heard with the quality you hear it on that day. But that's the beauty of music. It provides something different every time.

*DH: You grew up in Abroath, but you're now living in the environs of Glasgow.*

KC: I was a bit of a nomad for a little while, as classical musicians tend to be. I moved to Glasgow when I was a student, then I went to Toronto and finished my degree there, met my husband and came back to Glasgow – they offered me a scholarship to the opera program there. Then we went down to London for a while before returning to Glasgow. I love it there. I wouldn't change it!

*DH: I wish I could understand Glaswegian, but...*

KC: (laughing) I wish I could too, and I've lived there for nearly twenty years!

*DH: What was your last engagement before Cleveland?*

KC: Robin and I had two very intense weeks with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, where he's the music director. We did my first performances of Mahler 4, which was a departure for me, but very exciting. Robin really believed it was something that would fit me, and it was fantastic. It really opened up the other symphonies — I've done 2, 3 and 8 — and gave me a different understanding. Then we followed that with a performance of the *Kindertotenlieder*, which was my first outing with that piece.

*DH: And after Cleveland?*

KC: I go straight to New York on Sunday to start *Die Meistersinger* at the Met, so I'll be there for two months. Having Maestro Levine back on the podium is just tremendously exciting and it's a beautiful Otto Schenk production that they've had for quite some time.

*DH: That does take you away from your family for a long time. How do you keep in touch?*

KC: We Skype — what did we do before Skype? I'd love to give the guy that invented it a big hug. I did my son's homework with him yesterday and we occasionally watch movies together. My husband and son do travel to see me quite a lot. They definitely will be coming to New York for Christmas. He's quite a New Yorker, my son. We've had three Christmases there, and he loves it. I think he gets annoyed if he doesn't have Christmas in New York. I feel very blessed that I can share that with him.

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