

**Cleveland Orchestra preview: fifteen minutes
with composer Ryan Wigglesworth**



by Daniel Hathaway

It's a busy week for The Cleveland Orchestra. In addition to marking the 90th birthday of Pierre Boulez on Thursday, and playing the annual Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration Concert on Sunday, the orchestra, led by Franz Welser-Möst, will present a pair of concerts on Friday and Saturday evening that include Mahler's sixth symphony and the first performances of *Études-Tableaux*, a new work by British composer Ryan Wigglesworth. Wigglesworth is in his second and final year as the orchestra's Daniel R. Lewis Young Composer.

Wigglesworth, whose *Locke's Theatre* was performed by the orchestra last March, is building a distinguished career as composer, conductor, and pianist. A native of Yorkshire, he sang as a boy at Sheffield Cathedral and went on to Oxford, where he served as organ scholar at New College before continuing his studies at the Guildhall School of Music in London.

Wigglesworth has recently conducted Detlev Gianert's *Caligula* and Georges Bizet's *Carmen* at the English National Opera, and a double-bill of theater works by Oliver Knussen at Aldeburgh and at the Barbican. He famously stepped in for Antonio Pappano — sidelined with tennis elbow — for the revival of Harrison Birtwistle's *The Minotaur*

with the Royal Opera. (Watch a clip from the *Sitzprobe* [here](#), and see the video of an earlier conversation between Birtwistle and Wigglesworth [here](#).)

An engagement with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic in 2010 (video [here](#)) featured Wigglesworth in all three of his professional roles — as conductor, composer *and* pianist.

We reached Ryan Wigglesworth by telephone at his hotel in Chicago, where he had planned a stayover before going on to Cleveland.

Daniel Hathaway: What takes you to Chicago on this trip?

Ryan Wigglesworth: I thought I'd spend a day here because I've never been to the Art Institute, and I need to do that. I did spend time with the wonderful Cleveland collection last winter.

DH: I've been able to take a look at the score of Études-Tableaux. Your publisher wrote, "Wigglesworth drew inspiration for Études-Tableaux from aspects of material first conceived in 2009." That re-use of earlier material reminds me of Harrison Birtwistle's comments in the conversation I saw on YouTube.

RW: I withdrew the piece I wrote in 2009 for the BBC Symphony Orchestra. I wasn't happy with its shape, but I thought some things were salvageable. What happens with me when a piece is withdrawn is that I feel a terrible guilt for a while about it. When I've forgotten about how I wrote it and then come back to the score, it gets me going and I'm able to start again. But I need a few years in between so I can effectively treat it as someone else's work and think, alright, that was OK, that could go somewhere else. But then you end up writing a completely new piece. This one has a very specific structural aim — having its 'little windows' of thematic and harmonic ideas join up to make an arc. Of course, I hope that the listener won't see it as a set of little windows but will hear the line that goes through it. My big project is writing an opera on Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* for the English National Opera in 2017, and every other satellite project I do is somehow related to that, so those little windows are also windows into the opera.

DH: Mozart dreamed up compositions while playing billiards, and Beethoven was an inveterate sketcher. What is your own compositional process?

RW: I use pencil and paper, often working in the early stages at the piano then later at my desk. And I take care that while writing at the piano I'm not too bound up by what my fingers can do. I try to stay clear of the computer as long as possible. I'm rather slow at that and like all control freaks, I find that it just takes an awful lot of time. Over the past few years, I've come to sketch in two parts, like a Bach two-part invention. I feel that a lot of the greatest music ever written can be reduced to two parts — that's from William

Byrd to Bach, to Mahler, to Britten, to Copland. A lot of the time, the strength of the music is in its reducibility to treble and bass. It makes sketching a lot quicker, and the constant struggle is always getting something fleeting down on paper and putting ideas down in their simplest possible form.

DH: You'll be conducting Études-Tableaux in February, however, you won't be conducting its premiere. What does it feel like to have someone else conduct the first performances of a piece of yours while you sit out in the house?

RW: It's a strange experience, but of course I've never heard this piece before — though I have a strong idea about how it ought to sound. Your instinct is to want to back-seat drive, but then you relax. In Cleveland, we have a great conductor with a great orchestra, so the conditions are already as good as one gets. I actually have to relax in order to be able to take it in, so I'm learning about that. (Laughing) I'm trying. Hearing the piece twice is a great luxury. That doesn't happen often in England, if at all.

DH: You began your career as a boy chorister and an organ scholar. How was your training unique from other paths of education for young musicians?

RW: I think I've taken that a lot for granted — and of course it all started when I was a chorister singing the music of the Renaissance, which I feel closer and closer to as I get older. In the back of my mind, there's a sense that everything I do is aspiring to the condition of that music. It may not sound like it to a lot of people, but I think it's there at some subconscious level. But the organ scholar training, especially at New College, involved so many different types of skills, a lot of which one never seems to find a use for again. Like having to play Handel or Boyce from a facsimile of the original score, transposing from original clefs. It's an incredible thing to learn how to do, like working a crossword puzzle. But the least of it, in many respects, was sitting up there playing the organ. Higginbottom was a fine musician with a first-class brain, and you learned a lot by talking with him. Also by conducting the choir, which I did a lot of while I was there. Such wonderful repertoire, which I miss terribly. It was a big part of my life.

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