

Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra & Chorus to explore French music on February 8

by Daniel Hathaway



Having explored the music of John Adams, Roy Harris and Tchaikovsky in its first concert last November, the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra will turn to music by French composers for its Severance Hall concert on Sunday, February 8 at 7:00 p.m. The program will include Maurice Ravel's *Une barque sur l'océan*, Claude Debussy's *La mer* and Gabriel Fauré's *Requiem, op. 48*, featuring the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Chorus.

Speaking with music director Brett Mitchell by telephone about the February program, I noted that he's really throwing down a challenge with this repertory. "We always do," he replied. "The nice thing with young people is they don't realize that what they're taking on is going to be difficult — at least until they start practicing."

In this case, the programming began last spring in a conversation between Mitchell and COYC director Lisa Wong. "We sat down to decide what would be in the best interests of these young musicians. After brainstorming, we decided on the Fauré *Requiem*, which is eminently doable. Then I got to thinking, what would make a great pairing?"

Mitchell noted that the youth orchestra, like its parent, spends a lot of time playing Austro-German music. "But French orchestral playing is such a unique thing. The *Requiem* is pretty straightforward for the orchestra, so I thought, wouldn't it be cool to group a bunch of French music together? Just like a school unit on the civil war or geometry, to really immerse ourselves in the style."

"Programming the Fauré allows us to do such a challenging work as *La Mer*. It's a virtuoso showpiece that calls for transparency and is full of such wonderful colors. We've

been working on it since November and gave a preview by playing the finale on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. I'm amazed at the speed with which these young musicians have adapted to the challenges — both technically and musically. They just impress me every single time. They're playing the Debussy like pros. It's going to be a very special performance."

The Fauré was written in stages between 1887 and 1900 while the composer was organist at the fashionable Parisian church, La Madeleine. It is frequently performed, but almost never with the full orchestration the composer eventually gave it between 1899 and 1900. "That has to do with ticket sales, which always drives programming," Mitchell said. "The Fauré isn't a flashy piece, and if you're going to program a requiem, you're going to do the Mozart or the Verdi — or, if you have an extra \$500,000 lying around, the Berlioz. The nice thing about programming for COYO is that we aren't primarily interested in filling seats. Of course we want to entice people into the hall, but our primary responsibility is to the young people, who deserve a musical education."

So infrequently is the full version played that Brett Mitchell will be conducting it for the first time on Sunday. He went on to talk about some of the details. "We went back and forth about who should sing the *Pie Jesu* solo. The soprano section? The Children's Choir? Finally we decided that since you need an adult baritone soloist, it made more sense to hire a pair of soloists. Marian Vogel will sing the soprano, and Nikola Budimir the baritone."

The *Requiem* also features a prominent organ part, which will be handled by a member of COYO. "We have a full-time principal keyboardist, a very fine young pianist named Yun Cao." And he will benefit from the same kind of close attention the Youth Orchestra enjoys from its Cleveland Orchestra mentors. "It's one thing to play the piano and quite another thing to play the organ," Mitchell said. "Joela Jones, The Cleveland Orchestra's legendary keyboardist, has been extraordinarily generous in giving him one-on-one coaching time."

Published on ClevelandClassical.com February 3, 2015.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)