

BlueWater Chamber Orchestra: a conversation with guest conductor Raphael Jiménez

by Mike Telin



“I chose the pieces on this program because they belong to a part of the repertoire that was written more for the purpose of entertaining,” conductor Raphael Jiménez said of his upcoming BlueWater Chamber Orchestra program. “I did that on purpose — it’s the middle of winter, and what better way to spend a wintery night than listening to beautiful music.” On Saturday, February 28 at 7:30 pm in the Breen Center for the Arts, guest conductor Raphael Jiménez will lead the BlueWater Chamber Orchestra in performances of Fauré’s *Pavane* and Brahms’s *Serenade No. 1 in D*. The 75-minute concert will be played without intermission.

Raphael Jiménez joined the Oberlin Conservatory of Music as associate professor of conducting and director of Oberlin orchestras in 2011. How did the opportunity to conduct BlueWater come about? “Out of the blue,” he said with a laugh. “Carlton Woods sent me an e-mail asking if I was interested, and since I’m close by, it was easy to make it happen.”

Written in 1887, Faure’s *Pavane* was originally written for the piano, although today it is most often heard in the composer’s own version for orchestra with optional chorus. The piece was also choreographed by Leonide Massine and became part of the repertoire of Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes in 1917. It is interesting to note that Fauré intended the work to be played more briskly than it has generally come to be performed. Conductor Sir Adrian Boult, who heard Fauré play the piece several times, noted that his tempo was no slower than 100.

What is Jiménez's opinion about the tempo? "I spent a lot of my career as a ballet conductor. It is interesting to think of a beautiful line and melody in the context of something that has to be danceable. And I do think that when you see a processional danced, the tempo does make a difference. It requires a tempo that allows the couple to be able to have a constant rhythmic motion. But at the same time this gorgeous melody has to be able to sing, and that is one of the nice characteristics of this piece." As far as the version with chorus is concerned, "it was an afterthought, and I think Fauré added it because he was in a diplomatic situation with the dedicatee. But I do believe the piece is fantastic as an orchestral work without chorus."

Completed in 1857, Brahms's First Serenade was written at the time he was working on his first piano concerto. "When you think of Brahms, you think of the picture of him as a serious guy with a long beard, and that can be intimidating. But when you read more about him, you realize that in his 20s the guy was playing in bars and writing the famous Hungarian dances and going on tour with the violinist Joseph Joachim — basically entertaining people. And I think this piece reflects that side of Brahms — a musician who created wonderful musical moments. It's so shiny and is a cornucopia of melody — they keep coming one after the other in every single movement."

Jiménez said that he is increasingly concerned about the way classical music is presented to audiences. "I grew up in an environment where there was a side of the repertoire that was used as a lure for the audience. Music by Bizet, Gounod and Suppé was an entryway for people to get hooked on the symphonic sound. Today that part of the repertoire is not played as often — hardcore classical concertgoers want to listen to Mahler, and that's fantastic. But at the same time we are less exposed to music that is as sweet as the *Pavane*, or something as great as a Dvořák Slavonic Dance, for example, or even music from cartoons like you and I grew up listening to — Bugs Bunny was our first introduction to Rossini."

Born in Florida but raised in Venezuela, Raphael Jiménez is a proud son of El Sistema. Does he think that system can be replicated here? "Yes, I think the general idea of providing music education to everyone is transferable, but El Sistema has also just reached its 40th year. I like seeing the many initiatives that are called 'El Sistema-inspired,' because that does give you room to adapt to your local situation." However, Jiménez quickly pointed out that two essential conditions need to be in place in order to make that happen: leadership and money, in that order.

"El Sistema Venezuela has been successful because of the great leadership of José Antonio Abreu. He was a persistent lobbyist and because of that, people gave him what he asked for. And now, there are many businesses that make donations because they want to be associated with the program. They also receive a lot of resources from the government, which is the program's number one sponsor."

Jiménez also pointed out that the climate in Venezuela is a bit different from that of Cleveland in February. “When you live in a place where it’s at least 75 degrees all year, it’s easier. People can walk to rehearsals and things like that, which makes it easier for the program to function. However in Ohio I do see it working very well as an afterschool program, but then again you need to have transportation, and these details do make things more difficult. But that’s why we need to be creative and adapt to make it work under these circumstances. Again, leadership is the number one thing. Then you need to work extremely hard to make it happen, and there are many people right here who are doing just that to create great programs.”

As a violinist growing up in El Sistema, Jiménez had played all of the Beethoven and most of the Mahler symphonies by age 19. “Throughout my teen years I spent my days sitting in an orchestra playing great repertoire, and that’s the best way to learn music. Of course you have to combine that with good classroom education, too. But I do treasure my teen years because of El Sistema, and I was fortunate to be able to play when José Antonio Abreu was conducting. He was tough, but it was great because when you play that amount of repertoire, you absorb so much, and it makes you who you are.”

Raphael Jiménez is also enjoying his time at Oberlin. “It’s a fantastic place, and our best resource is the wonderful students that we have. They’re very smart, engaged, and eager to learn, and that makes it an exciting place to be.”

Published on ClevelandClassical.com February 24, 2015.

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