

## Cleveland Orchestra: a conversation with guest pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet

by Mike Telin



This week at Severance Hall, renowned French pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet returns to Cleveland, a city that played an important role early in his career when he won second prize at the Robert Casadesus Piano Competition in 1979 (now the Cleveland International Piano Competition).

“My first trip ever to the United States was for the Cleveland competition, and it absolutely played an important role in my career,” Thibaudet said in a telephone conversation this morning from his hotel. “After that I have had many wonderful performances with the Orchestra here and on tour with Maestro Ashkenazy along with the Rachmaninoff Concerto recordings. We’ve had a lot of memories together.”

Thibaudet will play Franz Liszt’s second piano concerto with guest conductor Fabio Luisi and The Cleveland Orchestra on Thursday, March 12 at 7:30 pm and Saturday, March 14 at 8:00 pm. The Thursday and Saturday programs will also include Luca Francesconi’s *Cobalt, Scarlet: Two Colors of Dawn*, and Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 7*.

Thibaudet made his debut with The Cleveland Orchestra in 1991 at Blossom Music Center, performing Liszt’s first concerto with Mariss Jansons. “I remember it very well,” he said, quickly pointing out that the concerto that he will perform this week is quite different.

“I love the second concerto. I think I may like it even more than the first,” he said. “It’s a very modern piece, especially considering when it was written. It begins right away with a theme in the woodwinds, then the piano takes it over. It’s like one cell that moves into many different shapes, forms, tempos and moods. The entire piece is connected by that theme, which is so beautiful with all of its modulations. Liszt plays with it and puts it in

every context he can think of. And the concerto is all in one connected movement, which was quite modern at the time.”

Thibaudet finds the concerto to contain all the brilliant virtuosity that you would expect from Liszt. “But there are a lot of beautiful, introverted, magical moments as well. There’s also a lot of interaction between the soloist and the orchestra, which is one reason why I’m really looking forward to playing it here in Cleveland,” he said. “There’s a solo with the cello in the middle part, but everybody has their own moment with beautiful solos where the piano is in fact accompanying. It’s almost like a big piece of chamber music. I find it very touching. That’s something that maybe people don’t expect from Liszt. They think he is always about virtuosity and pyrotechnics, and there is some of that, but this piece is pretty deep musically as well. I think it is richer than the first concerto.”

Thibaudet looks forward to his reunion with Fabio Luisi this weekend. “We have worked together quite a few times. The last occasion was in Vienna with his orchestra, the Wiener Symphoniker. We performed this concerto, so we’ve already rehearsed it somewhere else before bringing it to Cleveland,” he said, laughing.

Looking back over his career, Thibaudet has never shied away from being his own person, or voicing his displeasure with the stuffiness he finds in the world of classical music. Does he think things have gotten better over time?

“I think things have changed, because everything is changing in the world. The biggest influences have been social media, the internet, and the explosion of communication. It’s frightening to a certain degree, but at the same time it offers incredible possibilities. For example, all that YouTube has to offer. We musicians are all playing with this media too, and I think that makes a big difference in attracting people.”

Thibaudet moved on to talk about changing attitudes toward concert attire and the way that musicians present themselves to the public. “Back in the day, I think I was one of the few artists who did not wear a tuxedo, and I was criticized for that so many times. Why was I wearing what I did? What was my problem? But now, young musicians are wearing black suits with black shirts, and nobody is paying attention to it.

“I think the image of classical music is continuing to change and is attracting younger people. I do see the results. There are still some areas that are more problematic, places that are still heavy with tradition. In the States, I think it is much better than in the past, but it’s in Asia where you find the youngest concert audiences, especially in China.

“I’m positive and enthusiastic about the future but we still have to continue working. We need more education, and we need to go to more schools, so there is still much to do. I’ve

recorded a few soundtracks to films, which I think will attract a lot of people to come to concerts. But we have to continue to do as much as we can.”

In closing our conversation, I mention that Thibaudet shares my interest in the tango music of pianist Horacio Salgan, an artist we both had the pleasure of meeting in Buenos Aires. “Oh my gosh, I love Horacio Salgan, and good for you for finding that. I met him when I went to Buenos Aires many years ago for the first time, and we fell in love with each other musically. He’s an amazing human being and a great artist. He plays everything and has such a knowledge of music. We connected immediately and kind of became soul-mates. We would play for each other. He came to my concerts in Buenos Aires and then we went Club Del Vino, where he’d play until 1:30 or 2:30 in the morning. Because of that, I became completely enthusiastic about Tango and I still am. I wanted to do a project with him, recording and touring, which could have been so amazing, but then age became a factor for him — he was already 91 or 92 at the time. Unfortunately the project never got off the ground, but he gave me some of his scores. I saw him last year. It’s too bad he doesn’t play any more.”

In conclusion, Thibaudet shared a story about this incredible musician. “I asked Horacio for a signed photo to keep on the piano in my house, along with pictures of all the special people in my life. He gave me a photo, and in Spanish he had written, ‘It was so wonderful meeting you. You have enriched my life’. When somebody of that age and that stature tells you that, it’s just so incredibly touching.”

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