

Cleveland Wind Octet to feature music by Jeffrey Rathbun on the Chagrin Arts Series March 20

by Daniel Hathaway



As busy as they are at Severance Hall, members of The Cleveland Orchestra still find time to form a number of chamber music ensembles to perform around the region. One of the newest groups is the Cleveland Wind Octet, who played their inaugural concert on the Rocky River Chamber Music Series last spring. They'll play their second engagement on Friday, March 20 at 7:30 pm on the Chagrin Arts Series at Chagrin Falls Methodist Church (tickets available [here](#).)

The Octet includes Cleveland Orchestra members Alan DeMattia & Richard King, horns, Daniel McKelway, clarinet, Jeffrey Rathbun, oboe, & Barrick Stees & Jonathan Sherwin, bassoons, together with friends Richard Hawkins (clarinet professor at Oberlin) and Michele Smith (who plays oboe in the Toledo Symphony.) The March 20 program will feature Rathbun's *Rocky River Music*, in addition to Edvard Grieg's *Four Lyrical Pieces*, arranged by the late Chicago Symphony bassoonist Willard Elliot, and Wolfgang Amadè Mozart's *Serenade in c*, K. 388.

Jeffrey Rathbun joined The Cleveland Orchestra as assistant principal oboe in 1990, but he began composing much earlier, he told me in a telephone conversation. "The composing bug hit me in high school," he said. "I grew up in Abilene, Texas. My dad was a piano professor at Abilene Christian College. I started checking out recordings of Shostakovich, Bruckner and Mahler and composed some very bad symphonies at the piano. I even wrote down a movement or two."

While still in school, Rathbun wrote an oboe sonata that won a state music award. He continued writing music while studying at the University of North Texas, and while he was playing oboe in various orchestras in his 20s. "I wrote an oboe concerto and some chamber music, but I was never really prolific because of my performing duties."

Rathbun got a bit more serious about composing after he was appointed assistant principal oboe in The Cleveland Orchestra in 1990. “The Orchestra played three of my pieces: *Daredevil*, and *Motions for Cellos*, both of which Dohnány conducted, and *Three Psalms of Jerusalem* which I entered in an international competition. Leonard Slatkin conducted the *Psalms* in August of 1998 at Blossom.”

Since then, Jeffrey Rathbun has turned out woodwind quintets, chamber music for piccolo/flute, violin and piano, oboe pieces, an oboe duet, *Three Diversions*, which he wrote in 1987 for himself and John Mack, his teacher at CIM. “The *Diversions* have now gone into a second printing by Presser,” he said, noting that he’s inspired by the musicians he’s writing for. “I’m writing an English horn piece for Robert Walters of which we performed one movement last Spring. I hope to complete it this summer so he can perform it at Oberlin in the Fall.”

The Octet the audience will hear on the Chagrin Arts series was commissioned by Daniel McKelway and the Rocky River Chamber Music Society and took its inspiration from another work Rathbun wrote for a friend. “Frank Rosenwein asked me for an oboe and flute duet for his dad’s 70th birthday. It’s called *Recollections*, and it occurred to me that the middle movement, “Humanity,” might sound good in a larger ensemble. I used some of the ideas for the middle movement of the Octet. It’s mostly tonal and peaceful.”

Rathbun went on to describe the other movements. “The first is called “Danger,” but there’s no specific story. I like to title movements descriptively and not with Italian words. It’s a tense movement, with more dissonance, and though it suggests a feeling of danger, it’s not like the score to a horror movie. The third is called “Fearless.” It’s triumphant and maybe a bit pompous. It’s tonal, but with a few twists.”

Jeffrey Rathbun has enjoyed expanding the repertoire for wind octet with his *Rocky River Music*. “There’s not a lot of music written for that ensemble and I’m intrigued by the combination of instruments. Beethoven and Haydn wrote wind octets, and there are a few 20th century pieces that are played occasionally. I’m not exactly expecting mine to catch on either,” he said, modestly, but he has his sights on more composing in the future. “I’d love to write a couple of symphonies before all is said and done. I love the form.”

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