

ChamberFest Cleveland: fifteen minutes with bassist Nathan Farrington

by Jarrett Hoffman



“It’s pretty crazy, isn’t it?” bassist Nathan Farrington said of Prokofiev’s *Quintet* for oboe, clarinet, violin, viola, and double bass. “There’s a lot of circus imagery in the piece, and in the second-movement solo, I’m totally the dancing bear.”

Franklin and Diana Cohen’s ChamberFest Cleveland, beginning its fourth season on June 17, welcomes back bassist Nathan Farrington, who debuted with the festival last summer. A 2006 graduate of the Curtis Institute of Music, Farrington has appeared as

soloist with the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Columbus Symphony, and the Minnesota Sinfonia. He appears regularly in the bass sections of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Philadelphia Orchestra, Baltimore Symphony, Columbus Symphony, and the East Coast Chamber Orchestra. An avid chamber musician, Farrington has completed three summers at the Marlboro Music Festival.

Though he lives in Los Angeles, Farrington calls Columbus his hometown, and he still has a lot of family in Ohio. “A large part of my mother’s family grew up on a farm in Medina,” he said, “so this is a wonderful opportunity for me to come back to Ohio, make music with some fabulous musicians, and involve my family. It’s also a retreat from the urban setting that I’m glued to for most of the year, so it’s a really great treat.”

At ChamberFest this summer, Farrington will perform works including Bottesini’s *Gran Duo Concertante* for violin, double bass, and string quartet (June 23), Prokofiev’s *Quintet* (June 26), and Edgar Meyer’s *Amalgamations for solo bass* (June 27). See our [interview](#) with the Cohens for concert details.

“I share a house with some family members in L.A.,” said Farrington, “and they’ve been listening to me practice the Prokofiev. They think it’s pretty strange music. It actually is a bit odd in terms of tonality and what he asks the bass player to do. But after you put the pieces together, it starts to make sense. It’s kind of like tangrams. You have these weird little shapes and hard edges that come together to make some pretty neat images.”

Farrington broke down his “dancing bear” image for the solo that opens the second movement. “It’s big, gruff, and low. Bass solos aren’t often so low, actually. It lays very well and isn’t too technically difficult, so it’s a moment to really shine.”

The fifth-movement solo? “Terrifying,” said Farrington. “It’s this jazzy, *pizzicato* solo that runs all over the instrument, and you’re in charge of setting the mood for the whole movement. It really takes some planning. The first time I played the piece, I lit out with my tempo and left myself in the dust. You want to make sure that as the tasks get harder throughout the movement, you don’t leave yourself with an unsolvable equation.”

Fans of Garrison Keillor’s radio show *A Prairie Home Companion* may have already heard Farrington perform Bottesini’s *Gran Duo Concertante*. Playing the work in 2004, he was a finalist on the show’s “Talent from Twelve to Twenty” [contest](#).



Nathan Farrington and Katie Hyun at The Fitzgerald Theater, St. Paul, Minnesota, May 8, 2004. They were accompanied by pianist Andrew Staupe.

“It was a really neat experience and sort of serendipitous,” said Farrington. “A gal at Curtis and I had been competing with the Bottesini in Philadelphia and were doing really well, so we threw down a take of it and sent it off to the show. Sure enough, we got through. They brought in four groups playing completely different types of music that day, and the classical side was ours. I asked Keillor why they had taken us over other

submissions, and he said that his wife, a violinist, knew the piece and was so pleased with our recording that she insisted we be included. So I'm not even sure if he really made the commitment himself, but we got through the door somehow."

I asked Farrington to talk about the combination of double bass and violin as soloists. "There are two real perks to it. One is totally pragmatic: to sell the idea of being a double bass soloist to presenters and to have an orchestra really buy into the occasion, in the past I've absolutely had to team up with the more traditional solo instruments.

"The other benefit is that there are no competing registers. The bass is a strange instrument: the sound doesn't carry well, so being heard is always a concern. Someone playing in a similar register just wipes out a lot of the bass's sound. But violinists can get up there, sing their melodies, and play their crazy stuff, and it's not a problem in terms of balance. It's really a complementary pairing."

Farrington's own chamber arrangement, which he will perform at The Wine Spot on June 23, takes care of other auditory concerns. "Most of the times I've performed the piece with orchestra, I've had to amplify myself, which won't be necessary with the string quartet. This arrangement takes a lot of the pain out of trying to project over a big group."

Farrington thinks that informal venues like The Wine Spot are part of "the concert wave of the future. They set up chairs so everyone can hear and see, make sure there's some alcohol available — they have an incredible selection of beer and wine, as well as a bunch of stuff on tap — and then put on a show of entertaining music. I was impressed last year."

Those who attended last summer's concert at The Wine Spot will remember Farrington not only playing bass, but also singing and playing guitar. Any chance of a reprise?

"Yeah!" said Farrington. "I'm putting together a couple of tunes that bridge the gap between classical and country music. I have an opera aria and a blues song, both with librettos about women and troubles. I think it will work well."

Singing is serious for Farrington, who has developed his tenor over the years. Having studied with his father, Michael Farrington, as well as Mark Oswald, Farrington made his debut as tenor soloist in Beethoven's *Choral Fantasy* with Richard Goode and the Marlboro Music Festival Orchestra under Ignat Solzhenitsyn in August 2007.

"When I was finishing up in school," Farrington said, "my dad heard me singing in the shower and said, 'Let's take a look at your voice.' I've found singing to be a lot of fun. If you ever stick out as a member of a bass section, there's something wrong. But singing gives you a chance to assert your musical ideas in a totally appropriate way."

We closed our conversation on the topic of American bassist, multi-instrumentalist, and composer Edgar Meyer, one of Farrington's principal teachers. "After I started working with Edgar at Curtis, it became clear to me that he had developed some ideas and ways of getting around on the bass which opened up a universe of possibilities in terms of virtuosic playing.

"His music is super entertaining to watch and very rewarding to play. The risks are there, but they're not nearly as great as they appear to be, so you come off looking fantastic. He's a genius who figured out a way to consistently present the double bass doing things that people didn't understand were possible. He's expanded what the instrument can do hugely in a very short period of time."

Second photo: Kelly Schaub

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