

ChamberFest Cleveland: a conversation with violinist Alexi Kenney

by Mike Telin



Still in his early twenties, violinist [Alexi Kenney](#) has already amassed an impressive résumé. In 2013 he won the Concert Artists Guild Victor Elmaleh Competition at the age of nineteen. He has given recitals at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C., and Napa's Festival del Sole, and he has been featured on NPR's "From the Top." He is the recipient of top prizes at the Yehudi Menuhin International Competition, the Mondavi Center Competition, and the 2013 Kronberg Academy master classes. He attends the New England Conservatory, where he will enter its Artist Diploma program this fall, studying with Donald Weilerstein and Miriam Fried.

I spoke to the Palo Alto, California native by phone and began by asking him how his position as ChamberFest's Young Artist came about.

Alexi Kenney: As with anything else in the music world, I think it came about through some mutual connections. Diana Cohen played in a trio for a long time with Renana Gutman, the pianist that I regularly play with, and I think she recommended me.

Mike Telin: How many concerts are you involved in?

AK: I'm involved in most of the concerts, but I have to leave a couple days early to go to the Marlboro Festival.

MT: Are there any pieces you're particularly looking forward to playing?

AK: I'm especially excited about the Enescu *Octet* that we're playing on the opening concert (June 18). I love this piece. A couple of years ago I stumbled on a recording of Christian Tetzlaff and some of his friends playing it, and I still listen to it obsessively.

I've been hoping to get to play it for some time now, and I'm excited to have the chance. It's an unbelievable piece that is epic in proportion.

There are a lot of pieces I'm excited about. Another one is the Bottensini *Gran Duo Concertante* for violin, double bass, and string quartet (June 23). It's like Paganini for both the violin and the bass — an insane level of virtuosity. It's a great piece that rarely gets performed.

MT: You're playing that with bassist Nathan Farrington. Have you worked with him before?

AK: No, I've never met him, but I look forward to it. I'm also looking forward to the Prokofiev *Quintet* for violin, viola, oboe, clarinet and bass (June 26). It's an amazingly dark and quirky piece. It's also going to be great to play with winds. It's nice to play repertoire with different combinations of instruments.

MT: On Saturday the 20th at 2:00 pm you're giving a recital at the main branch of the Cleveland Public Library. Can you tell me about the program.

AK: I'll be playing the Schubert A major "Duo" with pianist Roman Rabinovich, and it is a piece I love to death. A piece that is slightly terrifying to me because I've never performed it is the Strauss *Violin Sonata*, which I'll be playing with Orion Weiss. It's kind of an embarrassment of riches to have two incredible pianists on one concert.

The third piece on the program is the *Solo Suite* by Johann Paul von Westhoff. I've been playing it a lot this season, because I like his music and it deserves to be played. It's a beautiful dance suite. Some people say that he and Bach met in 1703, and that this piece influenced Bach's own writing for solo violin.

MT: That's a wonderful program, and it is going to sound great in that space.

AK: I've never been to Cleveland so I Googled the Library and it looks like it's in the same style as the Chicago Cultural Center, where I played earlier this year. It's a beautiful space.

MT: Was that on the Dame Myra Hess series?

AK: That's right.

MT: I agree that it is a beautiful space. I look forward to hearing the concert.

AK: Thanks.

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