

Contemporary Youth Orchestra: Conversations with Liza Grossman and Dee Jay Doc

by Mike Telin



The Contemporary Youth Orchestra will present the first concert of its 21st season on Saturday, December 12 at 7:00 pm in Waetjen Auditorium at Cleveland State University. “The orchestra is exceptionally strong this year and has a sense of maturity not just in their work ethic, which they have always had, but also in their technical ability,” CYO founder and Liza Grossman said during a telephone conversation. Grossman will lead her young

musicians in Leonard Bernstein’s *Mambo*, Dee Jay Doc’s *Trust-Belt City: Concerto for Turntable and Orchestra*, and the centerpiece of Saturday’s program, Michael Daugherty’s *Metropolis Symphony*.

“I like Michael’s music very much and CYO has explored quite a bit of it, including movements from this symphony,” Grossman said, “but I wanted to wait for the right time to perform the entire symphony.”

Inspired by the Superman comics, Daugherty’s five-movement symphony was composed over five years, with each movement receiving separate commissions. The third and fourth movements — “MXYZPTLK” and “Oh, Lois!” — were commissioned and premiered by the Cleveland Chamber Symphony. Other commissions for the work have included the Baltimore Symphony (“Lex”), the New Jersey Symphony (“Krypton”), and the Albany Symphony (“Red Cape Tango”).

The entire 41-minute *Metropolis Symphony* was premiered in January 1994 by the Baltimore Symphony under the direction of David Zinman. The Nashville Symphony’s recording of the work won in three categories at the 2011 Grammy Awards, including Best Classical Contemporary Composition.

“I don’t think the piece has ever been performed in its entirety in Cleveland,” Grossman pointed out. “The orchestra is having a lot of fun with it, and it makes them feel accomplished because it is difficult. They also like the idea that it’s depicting a story, and the fact that Michael uses contemporary language to describe what he wants. For example, in “Oh Lois!” he doesn’t mark *presto* on the page, but rather ‘faster than a speeding bullet.’ When you see that marking, all of a sudden the bars of sixteenth notes appear very differently, and that changes the way the orchestra approaches the music.”

Grossman said that it is not until the finale, “Red Cape Tango,” that listeners will feel the presence of Superman. “The movement begins with two solo horns — one onstage, one off. I believe those solos are quoting Bill Withers’s *Ain’t No Sunshine*, but in any case they’re obviously a love call to Lois that shows the relationship between the two of them. I also like the way Michael uses the Tango rhythm against the *Dies irae* chant that is present throughout the movement. I think for the people who know the Superman tale, the piece will make for an incredible journey. It certainly is for the players, and for me.”



Trust-Belt City: Concerto for Turntable and Orchestra began as a song written by Cleveland DJ Doc Harrill, aka Dee Jay Doc, who I spoke to in a separate conversation. “I wrote my song *Trust-Belt City* about six months ago,” he said, “and it has been adapted for orchestra and turntable. It’s mostly rap, but the lyrics have been stripped for this version. The song was birthed from my experience living in Glenville and figuring out how to work with neighbors to create a healthy community. It takes hard work to meet other people, push through stereotypes, and begin developing relationships of trust,” he said.

Dee Jay Doc grew up in Mayfield Heights, but remembers visiting his grandfather in Collinwood, a place he also lived for nine years before moving to Glenville. “I was 21 years old when I got there. That’s where I started my recording studio and hip-hop career.” He recalled the time that it took for him to be invited to play pick-up basketball at the park. “It took me time to build trust at the park,” he said. Eventually he was invited to play. He and his crew also began organizing break-dances at the park. “Kids would come around, and over time they began to trust us. We’d talk about hard work — how if you put in the effort, it will pay off.”

In addition to *Trust-Belt City*, Saturday’s concert will also feature the turntable artistry of Dee Jay Doc on Miguel Atwood-Ferguson’s *Hoc n Pocky*, which is based on a hip-hop beat created by producer J Dilla. “That beat was reinterpreted for orchestra by Ferguson,” said Dee Jay Doc, “and I’ll be adding turntable to that piece.”

The genesis of Dee Jay Doc’s concerto is the same as Ferguson’s piece: it was originally a hip-hop song and was reinterpreted for orchestra with turntable. “In the beginning I created samples using my voice, producing a humming sound. I also use the turntable to create rhythms. There is a section where I’ll play duets with several members of the orchestra, and these represent my life in the neighborhood. For the duets I recorded a few notes played by CYO members, for example by a flutist and a violinist. I will be using their sounds, but I never could have recorded them without getting to know the players. I think the turntable lends itself to getting to know other people. These solos represent the interplay between two people who don’t know each other, but all of a sudden are doing things together and building trust.”

Saturday’s concert will also mark the kick-off of CYO’s “Funded by Passion” capital campaign, and Liza Grossman is excited about the Orchestra’s future. “I no longer see us as an orchestra that is focused on contemporary music,” Grossman said. “I see us as an orchestra that is focused on the entertainment industry as a whole. This year the players will participate in discussions and workshops with people in different fields and aspects of the industry. I feel it’s important for them to learn how to create a career.

“This is also the first time in our 20-year history that we have regular sectional faculty — they are the musicians who play in Playhouse Square shows, local orchestras, and chamber music ensembles, and who have private studios. These musicians have figured out a way to create a career for themselves in the music industry.”

Published on ClevelandClassical.com December 8, 2015.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)