

NEOSonicFest: a conversation with Cleveland Chamber Symphony's Stephen Smith

by Daniel Hathaway



NEOSonicFest, now in its third season, is the invention of the Cleveland Chamber Symphony, who will anchor the festival's 2016 programs with concerts on March 9 and 16. Other performances under the NSF umbrella have already featured two concerts by flutist Carlton Vickers sponsored by No Exit, and a performance by FiveOne Experimental Orchestra. The festival will continue with the Contemporary Youth Orchestra in "Music and Its Industry: music from video games" on Saturday, March 12, and a program of

works by members of the Cleveland Composers Guild on Sunday, March 13.

"NEOSonicFest is a bit more spread out this year," Smith said in a telephone conversation from Virginia, where he conducts the Richmond Symphony. "That's partly so we could capture two weekends, as we like to do, but we also ended up extending it to connect with the Baldwin Wallace Focus Festival. Our final concert on March 16 will also be their opening concert, which is an exciting development."

CCS's first concert on Wednesday, March 9 at 7:00 pm in Drinko Hall at Cleveland State University will feature works by Frank Wiley and the late Donald Erb, as well as compositions by winners of the Orchestra's Young and Emerging Composers Competition.

"Performing Don Erb's piece will be quite a momentous occasion," Smith said. "*Reconnaissance* may be the first work ever to feature live performance of electronic instruments with acoustic instruments. Erb worked with Robert Moog to develop instruments that were used at the world premiere at Expo 67 and were recorded by Nonesuch at the time.

“Those instruments, which would be thought of as dinosaurs today, no longer exist. On what will be almost the 50th anniversary of this piece, we’re using modern technology to recreate some of Don’s ideas. We take the involvement of electronics in live performance for granted today, but it was a revolutionary concept at that time. The idea of carting this big synthesizer out on stage, connecting it to acoustic instruments and players, and having a live person playing it rather than presenting it as a tape piece — this was really a brand-new thing.”

Both Donald Erb and Frank Wiley were directly connected to the Bascomb-Little Fund, a foundation that has supported new works and their performances for decades and is now celebrating its 50th anniversary. The March 9 concert will be given in honor of the Fund.

“Frank wrote *Horizon* for the Chamber Symphony a number of years ago, but he’s updated it and reworked it, so in a way it will be a new premiere,” Smith said. “It’s written for a small mixed ensemble of winds, harp, piano, percussion, and strings. I think it’s really good to have Frank and Don represented on a program that features the New and Emerging Composers. Don taught at the Cleveland Institute of Music and regarded teaching as a very important part of his life as a working composer, as does Frank, who continues to teach at Kent State University.”



The Baldwin Wallace Focus Festival will involve the school’s ensembles in an exploration of music by Bang on a Can composer David Lang. That festival begins on Wednesday, March 16 at 7:00 pm in BW’s Gamble Auditorium, when Smith will lead the Chamber Symphony and the Baldwin Wallace Chorus in works by David Lang.

“I’ve never worked with David Lang, but I’ve known his name for a long time, and he’s got a really fascinating, exploratory career,” Smith said. “The idea of connecting with Focus turned out to be a great opportunity for us. And Verb Ballets was very interested in dancing to one of David’s pieces, so we’ve ended up with a fascinating closing night concert for NEOSonicFest.”

The program for March 16 will include Lang's *statement to the court* and *pierced*. "The first piece, for chorus, strings, and bass drum, is a setting of a famous speech by Eugene V. Debs. Lang was asked to write a choral piece and wanted to do something political. He remembered reading the passionate speech Debs gave when he had just been found guilty of sedition for speaking out against American participation in World War I. David had it in mind to capture Debs' sense of idealism in a more contemporary moment.

"The other work, *pierced*, doesn't have that same kind of programmatic content," Smith said. "It's in the form of a *concerto grosso* for cello, percussion, and piano with a lot of wonderful interplay between soloists and string orchestra. That's probably the element that Verb Ballets found so compelling to translate into dance movements."

The Baldwin Wallace program will also include works by Jeffrey Mumford and Ruth Crawford Seeger. "I always like to pull out some kind of historical piece," Smith said, "and this year it's going to be Seeger's 1926 *Music for Small Orchestra*. It's fascinating because it incorporated so many of what we think of as standard 20th-century techniques — polytonality, polyrhythms, the use of ostinatos — at a time when those developments were very new. Seeger was a very prominent new music leader in the 1920s and 1930s, and the young Elliott Carter was very much influenced by her experimental music."

The Carter connection lives on in the music of Jeffrey Mumford, Smith said. "Jeffrey looks to Carter as one of his primary mentors. We'll play Mumford's *a garden of flourishing paths*. The title shows how drawn he is to poetry, whether he's setting words or not. He's also a visual artist with a fine sense of color and a multi-dimensional aesthetic."

Stephen Smith noted that outside the Cleveland Chamber Symphony programs, he's not had a lot of curatorial influence over this year's NEOSonicFest. "But I'm delighted to continue our relationship with the Contemporary Youth Orchestra, the Cleveland Composers Guild, and FiveOne Experimental Orchestra — and this year, to add No Exit, who presented Carlton Vickers. Those are all groups who curate their own concerts. It's going to be an interesting year."

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