

CityMusic Cleveland: a conversation with violin soloist Tessa Lark

by Mike Telin



“There are some challenging spots in the concerto, but it’s worth all of the effort. The melodies, as you would expect in Dvořák, are just sublime, the kind that never leave your ear,” violinist Tessa Lark said during an interview.

Beginning on Wednesday, May 11 at 7:30 pm at Mentor High School Performing Arts Center, CityMusic Cleveland Chamber Orchestra, under the direction of Avner Dorman, will

present the first of five area performances of Antonín Dvořák’s *Violin Concerto* featuring Tessa Lark. The program will also include Felix Mendelssohn’s *Hebrides Overture*, Op. 26 and the *Symphony No. 3*, “Scottish.” Check our [Concert Listings](#) for times and locations of additional performances.

We caught up with the 2016 Avery Fisher Career Grant recipient by telephone in Danville, Illinois, where she was performing Brahms’s *Violin Concerto* with the Danville Symphony. “My heart has been so full this week with both the Brahms and Dvořák concertos. It’s just a pleasure,” she said. “The orchestral part in the Dvořák would make a beautiful symphony on its own. The entire piece is chock-full of great moments. The guy must have been overflowing with ideas when he was writing it, and probably racing to put them down on paper.”

The Kentucky native said that she especially likes the way that Dvořák incorporates folk music into his concerto. “I love showcasing pieces like this — when even if they were written centuries ago, they come from hometown music. Composers were living, breathing people who liked the music that was around them.”

In addition to being awarded the Avery Fisher Career Grant, [Tessa Lark](#) is also a recipient of a career grant from the Leonore Annenberg Fellowship Fund for the Performing and Visual Arts. In 2012 she won the Naumburg International Violin Award and was the Silver Medalist at the 2014 International Violin Competition of Indianapolis, making her the highest-ranked American-born winner in the Competition's history.

Lark said that each award has played a significant role in advancing her career as a concert violinist. "Everybody in the business knows about the Avery Fisher Grant. It's not a competitive thing, the grant committee just calls and tells you that you've received the award. I think it helps presenters trust that they will get a quality performer when they hire you. So it has been a major boost, along with giving me more financial stability to help hone in my craft."

Because of her placement in Indianapolis, Lark is now in possession of the 1683 "ex-Gingold" Stradivarius violin, which is on loan from the Josef Gingold Fund for the International Violin Competition of Indianapolis. "It's extremely important to have a quality violin, and having it has changed my playing in so many ways. Gingold was concertmaster of The Cleveland Orchestra for a while, and he was also the teacher of many of the best violinists living today, including my own teacher, Miriam Fried. Meeting all the people who have encountered this violin throughout history is amazing. Many can recognize it from sight, but of course from its sound. And everybody has an amazing story to tell about Gingold, or when they first heard the violin."

This week's engagement with CityMusic can be traced back to Lark's Naumburg Competition win, which came with two Weill Hall recitals at Carnegie Hall. For the second, she was able to commission a new work. The composer she chose was Avner Dorman. "He wrote his *Fourth Violin Sonata* for me and I premiered it last October. We've formed a professional relationship and he invited me to play with CityMusic. I just love the orchestra's mission, and I've had great experiences with Avner, so of course I had to say yes."

Although Lark's entire family is musical — her father plays bluegrass banjo and her mother plays piano — she joked that no one but her has had the poor judgment to try to become a professional. "I grew up with my dad and his friends playing around the house. He's retired now but still plays in a gospel bluegrass band. I was playing the mandolin when I was four years old. I still love bluegrass music, and I try to play it as much as I can. For my first Weill Hall recital I programmed some Appalachian music, with permission from the Naumburg competition."

Lark earned her bachelor's and master's degrees from New England Conservatory, where she studied with Miriam Fried. "She's a hero of mine and always will be. She's a phenomenal musician and an amazing person who taught me a lot, not just about music, but about life."

After nine years of living in Boston, last summer Lark decided it was time for a change. She moved to New York and is now enrolled in the artist diploma program at Juilliard.

When not playing the violin, Lark said that she can usually be found in a coffee shop or taking advantage of the many amazing concerts that New York has to offer. "I also love art. There was a period of time when I was doing both, but then had to choose between art and the violin. I've also gotten into cooking, and I love wine, mostly reds like pinot noirs. I've recently discovered wines from Oregon. I'm also into chiantis. I guess I'm just a consumer in all kinds of ways."

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