

ChamberFest Cleveland: meeting up with accordionist-composer Merima Ključo

by Mike Telin

The second in a series of articles highlighting ChamberFest artists



In October of 2015, the extraordinary accordionist and composer Merima Ključo mesmerized audiences at the Cleveland Museum of Art during the performance of her composition *The Sarajevo Haggadah: Music of the Book*.

On Thursday, June 16 at 8:00 pm in Mixon Hall, Ključo returns to Northeast Ohio for the first of four performances presented as part of the 2016 edition of

[ChamberFest Cleveland](#). The concert, titled “Schumann Fantasies,” will include works by Robert Schumann and György Kurtág, as well as three movements from Stephen Coxe’s *A Book of Dreams* for accordion, piano, and percussion. A pre-concert talk by festival speaker Patrick Castillo will begin at 7:15.

“Everywhere I go, people are surprised by what the accordion is capable of doing. Even here in Europe, the instrument has a reputation as being only a folk music instrument, or a ‘bad music’ instrument,” [Merima Ključo](#) said during a Skype conversation from Zagreb, Croatia, where she was premiering a new musical score she had composed for a theatre production. “When I was a student I felt almost embarrassed to say that I played it because I knew people would say things like, ‘You can study that?’” Ključo recalled. “But when people come to my concerts, they tell me that they cannot believe an accordion can sound like that. Sometimes I even have people looking behind me because they think I’m using special effects. But in a way it’s really great to be a pioneer of your own instrument.”

On Friday, June 18, during an 8:00 pm concert at the Maltz Performing Arts Center, clarinetist Franklin Cohen will join Ključo for the world premiere of her new composition titled *Miriam the Prophetess, for Clarinet and Accordion*. In her composer notes Ključo writes:

Some years ago I had the honor of composing and arranging the music for Theodore Bikel's play *Sholom Aleichem, Laughter Through Tears*. One of the songs Theodore suggested to use in the play was *A Sudenyu* ... [The song mentions] important prophets and characters from Jewish history ... Moses teaching the Torah, David playing on his harp, King Solomon telling words of wisdom — but for me, the most interesting moment that really triggered my curiosity was the dance of the prophetess Miriam.

At that time I didn't know much about Miriam, but I was intrigued by the fact that there was an important female prophetess — which is not so common in male-dominated, Abrahamic religions. I was curious and wanted to know more about Miriam. Of course, when you start doing research, you find many fascinating details, but I decided not to go into those details and to keep it very simple, since my inspiration for the composition, *Miriam the Prophetess*, has more to do with the childlike fascination with tales and stories than with intellectual or religious interpretations

Ključo will perform two works for solo accordion during “Movie Night” on Monday, June 20 at 8:00 pm at Dobama Theatre. “I love Jukka Tiensuu's *Aufschwung*,” the accordionist exclaimed. “I consider it to be the first real concert piece for accordion. It's a great work to shock audiences, because he uses almost every possible technique you can play on the instrument during six or seven minutes,” she said. “I remember giving a workshop for composition students, and I talked about the history of the instrument and played arrangements of Baroque music. They were all looking at me like, ‘Do we really have to listen to this for one and a half hours?’ But when I played the Tiensuu you could see them waking up in shock. They ended up keeping me for more than two hours with questions. That's why I love the piece: it showcases all the instrument can do, it's very well written, and it's almost melodic in its radical, atonal way.”

The program will also include Ključo's own *Ihtimanska Kopanica*, which she said is more traditional in sound and is based on a traditional Bulgarian melody.

Sofia Gubaidulina's *Sieben Worte* for cello, bayan, and strings will be featured on Monday, June 27 at 8:00 pm at the United Methodist Church of Chagrin Falls. “Bayan?” I asked. “Bayan is the Russian word for accordion,” Ključo explained. “Some people say it sounds different, but then every instrument sounds different.”

Ključo said that she is inspired by Gubaidulina and her music, and feels lucky that the composer wrote for her instrument. “She has a few pieces for accordion and they are wonderful. It’s great to have a composer like her writing music for the instrument at a time when the repertoire is being developed.”

On Thursday we meet mezzo-soprano Marjorie Maltais.

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