

## July 17 Cleveland Orchestra Concert at Blossom to mark centennial of National Park Service

by Neil McCalmont, Mike Telin & Daniel Hathaway



On August 25, one hundred years ago, President Woodrow Wilson signed into law the Organic Act of 1916 that established the National Park Service, building on the conservationist legacy pioneered in 1872 with the creation of the first National Park at Yellowstone.

Since 1933, the Service has also managed National Memorials, Military Parks, Cemeteries, and Historical Areas. A latecomer to the national parks

family in 2000, Cuyahoga Valley National Park is the only national park in the state of Ohio, a large chunk of land that includes sites not owned by the federal government — including the Blossom Music Center.

On Sunday, July 17 at 7:30 pm, The Cleveland Orchestra will mark the centenary of the National Park Service with a special concert conducted by Bramwell Tovey. In a recent [interview](#) with this publication, the Orchestra's centennial of the National Park Service with a special concert conducted by artistic administrator Ilya Gidalevich noted that the Cuyahoga Valley National Park has played an important role in the history of Blossom Music Center. "We wanted to make sure that we celebrate the National Park Centennial in a special way," he said. The American-influenced program will include Ravel's *Rapsodie espagnole*, Copland's Suite from *Appalachian Spring*, and Gershwin's *An American in Paris*. Spanish pianist Javier Perianes will make his TCO debut in Ravel's jazz-inspired *Piano Concerto in G*.



*Franz Welser-Möst and The Cleveland Orchestra, July 9, 2016.*

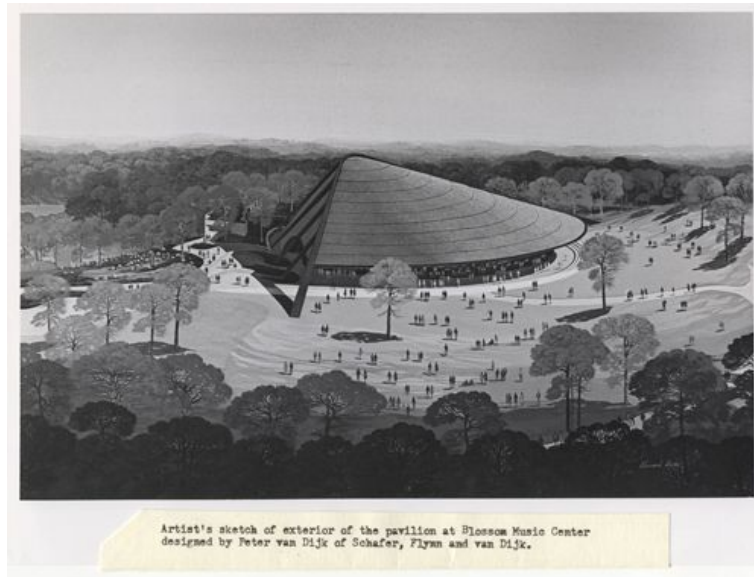
The area itself has been a local retreat since the 1870s, when it was a center for carriage and boat rides, even servicing its own railway to Cleveland. The Civilian Conservation Corps built much of the park's infrastructure during the Great Depression, and widespread fear of urbanization led to its 1974 promotion to the status of National Recreation Area and eventually its designation as a National Park.

By 1965, Cleveland was the only one of the “Big Five” American orchestras that had not established a summer venue and a 52-week contract for its players. Given its longstanding history as a refuge for Northeast Ohioans, the valley seemed like a perfect place for The Cleveland Orchestra's summer home. After a year-long search, the location was approved by the trustees, as well as musical director George Szell, who scrupulously surveyed the grounds for an acoustically pristine setting.



*George Szell checks out the future Blossom site by helicopter.*

The natural amphitheatre provided an excellent spot for a pavilion. The site was sufficiently removed from the noise of land and air traffic, and there was no large body of water that would subject musical instruments to moisture. Initially, the 1500 surrounding acres were planned to include golf courses and residential communities, calming the fear of potential urban sprawl and city noise pollution.



Artist's sketch of exterior of the pavilion at Blossom Music Center designed by Peter van Dijk of Schafer, Flynn and van Dijk.

The architectural firm of Schafer, Flynn, and van Dijk conceived the plan for the complex. Peter van Dijk designed the pavilion and Christopher Jaffee was the acoustician. The center was named after the Dudley S. Blossom family, who were its main contributors. Dudley was largely responsible for the orchestra's Endowment Fund, and served as the orchestra's president during the 1930s.



*George Szell and Peter van Dijk at the construction site.*

After the initial purchase of over 500 acres, the groundbreaking ceremony took place on July 2, 1967, and the opening concert on July 19, 1968. George Szell led The Cleveland Orchestra in an all-Beethoven program featuring *The Consecration of the House Overture* and the immortal *Symphony No. 9 in D*. The first season was a huge success, though there were a still a few improvements to be made, described in a letter by Szell himself:

## THE CLEVELAND ORCHESTRA

GEORGE SZELL, *Musical Director*  
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17 August 68

Office of the Musical Director

Dear Beverly,

Thanks for yours of 12th inst. Am speechless and overwhelmed ~~at~~ <sup>at</sup> March. Had nice note from Steinberg, cabled him inviting him for opening Blossom week 68. Skrowaczewsky had great, well deserved success. Had good shoptalk which he accepted with grace & understanding. Main trouble manual technique & tenseness. Weissenberg, his soloist played brilliantly, coldly and, as one Viennese paper put it "with the poesis of an electric sewing-machine." (Chopin e minor).

Now to Blossom. The season is almost over and everybody must be overjoyed at what can be called only a smashing success beyond wildest dreams. I hope you and all concerned will agree that this should be a spur to new improvements and evening-out of kinks, not an invitation to smugness. We have to realize that we have been incredibly lucky in more ways than one, - especially, - and this is apt to be overlooked, - with the weather during the 2 opening weeks. I have since received a number of reports, direct and indirect and must now point out the most important improvement upon which I have to insist if I am expected to appear there again even for five minutes: The Airconditioning of the whole stage area. I remember the promises for next season and the assurance that the ducts are all there and that only the machinery has to be installed and connected. This has to be done forthwith, even before winter sets in so that its functioning can be checked on a freak hot day in fall. You will be aware that I cabled you merely that "I can do, final week blossom 68" but made no commitment. Now I am serving notice on you and on all others concerned that you are not entitled to advertise me in connection with Blossom 68 before the Stage Air Conditioning is installed, functioning and approved by me. One more thing: I shall not accept cool comfort for the conductor only (à la Saratoga) but must insist on maximum obtainable comfort for all players on stage. This will be conducive to better playing, better intonation and better spirit of all and one. It has to be remembered that the tight enclosure of the stage which is part of the stunning acoustical success is at the same time a heat-& steamtrap of the worst sort, - even in not extreme weather. Since a lot of money can be saved by the fact that the acoustical side-panels have proved to be superfluous, there is no excuse to skip on the Air Conditioning on Stage. I trust you will make an impressive presentation of this.

I am looking forward to your report on the N.Y trip. Too bad about Carlos. I plan to phone him this noon, our time.

All best, as ever

  
George Szell

Over the seasons, one staple of the festival has become the so-called "Blossom Boom," the result of sliding metal joints due to pressure changes that emit a sound like a gunshot. Reportedly fixed on several different occasions, the Boom continues to be heard by

audience members even today, haunting Blossom not as a demon, but more as Casper the friendly ghost.

Since its opening night, the Blossom Festival has provided its audiences with a long list of world-class performances. The festival has grown in size and success, but it still holds to the principle of what made it so sought-after since its inception: great music played by a great orchestra in a welcoming, pastoral setting.



*Fireworks after the Cleveland Orchestra concert on July 9, 2016.*

*Photos from the Cleveland Orchestra Archives. Special thanks to archivist Deborah Hefling. Photos from July 9, 2016 by Roger Mastroianni.*

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