

Jahja Ling to lead two concerts this weekend at Severance and Blossom

by Mike Telin



This weekend is going to be a busy one for conductor Jahja Ling. On Friday, July 22 at 7:00 pm he'll lead The Cleveland Orchestra in a Summers @Severance concert featuring the three finalists of the Thomas and Evon Cooper International Piano Competition (left, in 2014). The following evening at 8:00 pm at Blossom Music Center, Ling and the Orchestra will present a concert featuring Igor Stravinsky's *Four*

Norwegian Moods, Jean Sibelius's *Symphony No. 1 in e*, and Edvard Grieg's *Piano Concerto* with Jean-Yves Thibaudet as soloist.

Jahja Ling has enjoyed a long relationship with The Cleveland Orchestra. He served as Associate Conductor during the 1984-85 season, Resident Conductor for 17 years from 1985-2002, and as Blossom Festival Director for 6 seasons (2000-05). Working with young musicians has always been an important part of his musical life. He founded both the San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra and the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra, and has also conducted TCO during the finals of the Cooper Competition since it's inception in 2010.

"I have worked with young people throughout my career," Ling said gleefully during a recent telephone conversation. "I founded two youth orchestras and brought many young soloists to perform with The Cleveland Orchestra for the first time. I also work with many conservatory orchestras so I feel like the Cooper is a continuation of my work."

Ling noted that the Cooper Competition is rare in that it is specifically for young musicians. “Most competitions are for people who have already finished conservatory or college and are ready to jump into the professional level, but this is for musicians before they go to conservatory,” he said. “It’s amazing because so many of them have already accomplished so much. It’s been an honor to nurture and guide them in understanding how to collaborate with an orchestra, especially with one as great as The Cleveland Orchestra. That’s why my role is to make sure that they feel as comfortable and confident as they can. Of course the members of the orchestra are always so supportive of young people too.”

Rehearsal time for this weekend’s concert is at a premium. On Thursday Ling will rehearse the repertoire for the Blossom concert and in the late afternoon he will meet with each of the three Cooper finalists prior to their Friday morning rehearsals with the orchestra. “Right now I don’t even know what concertos I will be conducting,” he said. “Depending on what concertos the finalists have chosen to play it could be three, two, or even one. It’s always fantastic to work with such young talent who will later go on to great schools and move on to be professionals. So I think this is a very worthwhile project that Mr. and Mrs. Cooper are sponsoring.”

Shifting our conversation to Saturday’s Blossom concert, I asked Ling what led to the program’s Scandinavian theme. “I haven’t conducted Sibelius No. 1 with The Cleveland Orchestra for a long time,” he said. “I love the piece and when I suggested it, everyone thought it was a great idea, especially since Jean-Yves Thibaudet was going to play the Grieg concerto.”

Ling pointed out that the inclusion of Stravinsky’s *Four Norwegian Moods* came at the suggestion of TCO artistic administrator Ilya Gidalevich. “I have never conducted the piece, but when he asked if I would consider it, I looked it over and thought ‘Yes, this is great!’ I like to program works that are unusual and less familiar. It completes the Scandinavian theme, but at the same time it’s not just a beautiful Romantic melody, because Stravinsky put the tunes in his own neo-classical style. So I think the piece fits very well into the program.”

Two of the works on Saturday’s program have special meaning to Ling: he made his Cleveland Orchestra debut as a pianist playing the Grieg concerto. “When I was growing up in Indonesia, I was absolutely enthralled with the Szell/TCO recording with Leon Fleisher. I listened to it over and over everyday. I’m looking forward to performing it with Jean-Yves, he’s a close friend and it’s always nice to collaborate with a great pianist like him. We’ve played many concertos together — both in Cleveland and other places — but this will be our first Grieg.”

Sibelius's symphony holds a place in the conductor's heart as well. "This was the last piece I conducted as music director of COYO and that was a memorable moment for me. Sibelius is one of my most favorite composers. I love his music and his character — that northern Scandinavian melancholy, which is very different from the Russian."

Most of all, Jahja Ling looks forward to returning to Blossom Music Center for his 32nd consecutive year. "This concert will be very special because I will get to be with my beloved orchestra colleagues. We are so familiar with each other that we also make great music together."

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