

Contemporary Youth Orchestra: a conversation with Andrew Sords

by Mike Telin



The Contemporary Youth Orchestra will kick off its 21st season with a concert on Saturday, December 10 at 7:00 at Cleveland State University's Waetjen Auditorium. The program will feature celebrated violinist and CYO alum Andrew Sords in a performance of Samuel Barber's *Violin Concerto* under the direction of Liza Grossman.

"I feel like I'm the only thirty-year-old violinist on the planet who's never performed this concerto," [Andrew Sords](#) said during a recent telephone conversation. "But I am of

the Zen mindset that when it is meant to be, something or someone will show us that it's the right time. And 20 years ago to the day of this performance, I played my first concert as a member of CYO."

When Grossman approached Sords about playing a concerto with the orchestra, he said that her only stipulation was that the composer must be from the 20th century. "Of course there are many composers who fit that demand, but I immediately thought of the Barber."

Sords, who at the time of this interview had just returned from performing concertos and solo recitals in Australia, said he is excited about Saturday's concert because it will be his first performance in the United States since the election. "Barber was an American composer and an openly gay man who was alive during the 20th century. That has taken on a new meaning for me after November 8.

The violinist said that he looks forward to being onstage with the CYO members. “There’s nothing like working with a teenage ensemble. There’s a level of excitement because they are discovering things for the first time — the same as it was when I was in the orchestra.”

In addition to working with a young Andrew Sords in CYO, Liza Grossman was his first violin teacher. “From the beginning he showed signs that he possessed a natural talent for the instrument,” Grossman said during an interview. “The first piece I gave him was *Twinkle-Twinkle* and I showed him how to play it on the A and E strings,” she recalled. “He came back the next week and showed me that it could also be played on the G and D, and the D and A strings. Then he said ‘look what you can do,’ and he played the entire piece with his first finger on the G string. It was a natural thing for him to explore the way the instrument worked. He would even talk about how the different ways of playing something would produce brighter and darker colors.”

Although he always enjoyed the violin, it took Sords a while to decide to pursue music professionally. “I thought I would replace Omar Vizquel on the Indians roster or become a secret service agent,” he said. “Then I went to Interlochen. Being around so many gifted kids, I remember thinking that if they were working so hard and achieving so much, then maybe it would be possible for me to do that as well.”

During Saturday’s program Grossman will yield the podium to collegiate guest conductor Victoria Petrak for the world premiere of Fay Wang’s *The Play of Toys*. “For the first time we sent out a collegiate call for conductors,” Grossman said. “We chose Victoria Petrak, a senior violin major at Baldwin Wallace University. On purpose, I did not give her the midi recording of the work for four weeks after she received the score. I wanted her to have to tap into her own ability to decide on an interpretation of the piece. She’s doing a great job.”

The evening will also include CYO concerto competition winner Wenlan Jackson in a performance of the first movement of Jean Sibelius’s *Violin Concerto*. The 14-year old is a freshman at Beachwood High School and in her second year with CYO. A student of Ivan Ženatý, she’s also the youngest person to win the competition.

Music by two of Grossman’s favorite composers will also be featured: Tan Dun’s *Internet Symphony No. 1 “Eroica,”* and Leonard Bernstein’s *Symphonic Dances*

from West Side Story. “This is a lot of high-level music for the first concert of a season,” Grossman said. It’s a very big deal for us.”

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