

Cleveland Orchestra: a conversation with guest conductor Harry Bicket

by Daniel Hathaway



This week's Cleveland Orchestra concerts will feature Baroque music by Handel, Rameau, and Purcell, led by British guest conductor Harry Bicket, who has established a distinguished operatic career at Glyndebourne, Covent Garden, The Met, and Santa Fe. Since 2007, he has served as artistic director of The English Concert, an early music ensemble founded by Trevor Pinnock, who led the group for 30 years.

Bicket's career trajectory might have gone in quite a different direction. After posts as organ scholar of St. George's Chapel at Windsor Castle and Christ Church Oxford, he was appointed sub-organist at Westminster Abbey at the age of 23. Well on his way to becoming organist at a major English cathedral, Bicket had doubts. "I thought, OK, I could stay at the Abbey for the next 40 years, considering it's just about the best job ever," Bicket said by telephone from his home in London, "but is that really what I want to do?"

He left Westminster Abbey without any real plan in mind. "I was freelancing in London as a pianist, harpsichordist, and organist when I happened to speak with Mark Elder of the BBC. He told me there was a job opening at the English National Opera. Would I be interested?"

Bicket said he had no experience at all with opera, but Elder insisted that he apply. "Come along," he told me. "Organists are trained to transpose and to read score, and you're used to working with orchestras and choruses. You may not know *Traviata*, but you have great facility, and you can learn quickly."

Amazed that he got the job, Bicket spent 5 years with the ENO, working on some 60 operas with conductors like Charles Mackerras and Colin Davis and a slew of distinguished directors. “It became fairly clear that this is what I wanted to do.”

Those productions were all standard titles in the repertory. “Baroque opera didn’t really exist in the late ‘80s — until the ENO decided to mount a production of Handel’s nearly unknown opera *Ariodante*.”

Once again, Harry Bicket found himself heading in a new direction. “The ENO knew that I’d worked with some period instrument orchestras as a harpsichordist. They said, ‘The orchestra knows you. Why don’t you conduct it? You’ll be fine.’ That *Ariodante* production turned out to be iconic and is still being performed all over the world. Overnight I suddenly became a Baroque specialist.”

Bicket spent the next twenty years concentrating in Baroque opera, but now finds himself returning to pieces in the standard repertoire as well. “It’s amusing. Now when I conduct *Russalka* or *Carmen*, people say, ‘That’s a bit of an adventure for you, isn’t it?’”

The conductor’s appointment to Santa Fe Opera in 2013 came out of the blue as well. “I got a call asking me to talk to Charles MacKay in New York, who bluntly said he was looking for a new chief conductor.” Bicket had worked with the Santa Fe company since 2004 and had always loved it. “But I was recently married with one child and another on the way, so spending three months in New Mexico every summer seemed like a stretch.”

Bicket told McKay that he had to consult both his London orchestra and his wife, who is an environmental professor at Imperial College. “The orchestra said that time of year is not so busy in London, and my wife, bless her, said, ‘It’s a fantastic idea — let’s do it.’” The Bicket family now spend their summers in Santa Fe, where his contract has been extended until 2020. “The orchestra have a great attitude toward their work, which is not true of all summer festivals. They really want to be there, doing their best. Once they get the job there, they never want to leave.”

Bicket will be making his Cleveland Orchestra debut this weekend, a date that has been a long time in coming because of scheduling issues. He’s looking forward to preparing old music with a modern orchestra, a process he says has changed markedly over the course of his career.

“I remember doing this as a 30-year-old when orchestras had a very different makeup — people who looked like your father who had been playing Mahler since before you were born.” Bicket feels that the rhetoric of Baroque music is more familiar for younger players who have experienced jazz and rap. “People are a lot more open, and those styles feed more into Baroque repertory than Romantic and early 20th-century music.”

While he feels that you can't create the right sound for Baroque music with modern instruments, Bicket thinks it's a shame that major orchestras have been deprived of that repertoire.

“I played Bach Suites with the Chicago Symphony a few years ago, and players came up to me and said, ‘It's so great to be able to play these pieces again. We haven't done them for 30 years because the period instrument brigade somehow made us feel we weren't allowed to play this music.’ That's just ridiculous,” Bicket said. “All orchestras should play pieces like the B-minor Mass and the Matthew Passion. Music transcends any kind of dogma. I have some strong opinions, but I grew up with von Karajan's Brandenburg Concertos. I wouldn't do them that way myself, but it doesn't invalidate the approach.”

This weekend's program includes Handel's *Concerto Grosso*, Op. 6, No. 11, Jean-Philippe Rameau's Suite from *Les Boréades*, Henry Purcell's Suite from *King Arthur*, and Handel's *Music for the Royal Fireworks*.

“Handel and Purcell look so simple, but if you play their music literally, it sounds like nothing,” Bicket said. “You have to bring a lot of your own personality and invention to it — something a lot of modern orchestras don't encourage, but I suspect The Cleveland Orchestra musicians already have that sense.”

On the other hand, Bicket said that Rameau seems to be a more natural fit for modern players. “His rhythmic detail is so finely tuned and intricate that it's in some ways more like Stravinsky than Handel, and it requires more left-hand technique from the string players. There's a lot of shifting that you don't have to do in Handel or Purcell.”

One piece on the program that requires some adaptation for the concert hall is Handel's *Royal Fireworks Music*. “Unfortunately, we can't use 18 oboes and 24 bassoons, and obviously we're not playing the piece outdoors,” Bicket said. “But modern oboes, horns, trumpets, and bassoons will more than make up for the smaller numbers.”

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