

Cleveland Orchestra to feature three of its own as soloists this week

by Mike Telin



This week The Cleveland Orchestra, under the direction of guest conductor Andrew Davis, will feature three of its principal players as soloists — one in Ralph Vaughan Williams’s Oboe Concerto and two in Richard Strauss’s epic tone poem *Don Quixote*. Concerts at Severance Hall are scheduled for Thursday, April 20 at 7:30 pm, Friday, April 21 at 11:00 am (without the Vaughan Williams), and Saturday, April 22 at 8:00 pm. The program, which begins with Frederick Delius’s *Brigg Fair, An English Rhapsody*, will also be presented in Oberlin’s Finney Chapel on Friday, April 21 at 8:00 pm as part of the school’s Artist Recital Series.

TCO principal oboe Frank Rosenwein said that Vaughan Williams’s *Concerto for Oboe and Strings*, written in 1944, is both pastoral and nostalgic. “He lived through the first world war, and this Concerto was written near the end of the second world war. The piece does cultivate a kinder, gentler world.”

For Rosenwein, the Concerto embodies Englishness, from the ecclesiastical to the pastoral, along with a hint of the pomp and arrogance of empire. “The first movement begins in Dorian mode and harkens back to something primeval or medieval,” the oboist said. “The first melody is based on a plainchant, *Salve Regina*, so we are immediately thrust into a contemplative world of the past.”

Rosenwein said that the second movement may be the strangest of the three. “It’s a minuet but not really a dance, though it is a bit jaunty. It’s brief and understated and has the English character of the stiff upper lip — I hear the twirl of the waxed mustaches and

the tapping of the cane on the way to high tea, as well as the pomp that is at the heart of that era's idea of Britishness.”

The third movement, the oboist noted, finds Vaughan Williams at his most luscious. “It is kaleidoscopic and begins with long runs in the solo line that are matched by the strings. The beautiful melody at the end highlights the English countryside.”

The concerto was written for Léon Goossens, the star oboist of that time and the son of conductor and composer Eugène Goossens. “Léon both commissioned and had many pieces written for him, including this one, a concerto by his father, and several pieces of chamber music. He revitalized the oboe repertoire in England for decades, so we oboists are continuously indebted to him. He was a trailblazer in that he was one of the first oboists to popularize the use of vibrato, and was greatly influenced by Fritz Kreisler. Goossens also helped Vaughan Williams understand how to be generous to the oboist, and because of that, the Concerto is a lot of fun to play.”

Miguel de Cervantes's *The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote of La Mancha*, published in two volumes in 1605 and 1615, is widely considered to be one of the greatest novels of all time. It has provided inspiration for many writers, filmmakers, and composers. Arguably the most famous adaptation of the novel in the classical music canon is Richard Strauss's tone poem *Don Quixote*.

TCO principal cello Mark Kosower, who will take the role of the title character, said that the piece presents a unique set of challenges that are stimulating and interesting. “It is a very fun undertaking,” the cellist said. “As an interpreter I find it very empowering to musically portray what is happening in the story. But it also brings up the debate in musical-intellectual circles of that time regarding absolute music versus program music.”

Kosower said that performing the role of Don Quixote is different from playing the concertos of Victor Herbert or Saint-Saëns. “This is program music with a story that people can read,” Kosower said. “By contrast, the Dvořák Concerto is absolute music, even though we know that the theme in the second movement was one of the favorite songs of his wife's sister, Josephina. Dvořák was in love with Josephina before she rejected him and he married her sister. All music has a story, it's just that with absolute music we don't always know what it is.”

Because there are so many solos for members of the orchestra throughout the piece, Strauss's tone poem verges on being a *sinfonia concertante*. “Not only is the role of Sancho Panza played by the viola, but the concertmaster has a big role, and there are many clarinet, horn, and other wind and brass solos, too. In a way, it's like an opera — the lead role is also part of a much larger tapestry.”

While preparing for that role, did Kosower revisit Cervantes' story — or did he read numerous chivalric romances and lose his sanity like Don Quixote himself? “Legitimate question,” Kosower said, laughing. “Yes, I read some of the story, but you also have to keep in mind that Strauss's version is somewhat different. For example, in the book where Don Quixote charges the sheep, he breaks some ribs and is injured, but in the tone poem he leaves the battle unscathed. What is most important is that Strauss's piece is a study of the various characters from the novel — it's a quick tour through the book.”

The performances will mark the solo debut of TCO principal violist Wesley Collins. “Strauss did a great job of portraying all of Sancho Panza's different personalities,” Collins said during a separate telephone conversation. “He's a down-to-earth, straightforward person who has a quirky sense of humor that you can hear throughout his music — at times he'll even refer to ironic Spanish proverbs. Even though he's illiterate, he has a common-sense intelligence about him, so it's a fun part to play.”

Collins noted that the different sides to his character are evident from the viola's first entrance. “When Don Quixote introduces himself, Sancho Panza immediately interrupts. At first he's brash, but within a few seconds he goes back and forth from shy to funny. Originally the musical line is very expressive, then all of a sudden it switches gears into a rustic, peasant-like melody. During some of the solo parts it's like you're telling jokes, so there are a lot of musical choices that need to be made.”

Collins said that he looks forward to revisiting the piece, which he last played with the Akron Symphony ten years ago. “I was just thinking about the difference that ten years makes. As an undergraduate playing the piece for the first time, my focus was more on the technical side of things. Now I've shifted from making sure that everything is solid — with all of the i's dotted and t's crossed — to thinking about how to create the right character. How do I make people laugh? That's what makes it interesting.”

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