

Brett Mitchell to lead his final COYO concert on May 12 at Severance Hall

by Mike Telin



“I don’t know where four seasons went,” Brett Mitchell said by telephone. On Friday, May 12 at 8:00 pm in Severance Hall, Mitchell will conduct his final concert as music director of the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra before relocating to Denver to become music director of the Colorado Symphony. The program will include works by Joan Tower, Sergei Prokofiev, and Maurice Ravel.

Friday’s concert will be performance number 29 for Mitchell. He said there is something to be proud of in all of them, although the accomplishment of which he is most proud goes beyond the music. “It is the sense of family that we have built. What I find most rewarding is when I compliment someone or a section during rehearsal, the automatic response from the rest of the orchestra is to shuffle their feet and cheer.”

Mitchell recalled that following COYO’s tour to China, he reminded his players that there are no great achievements in life that can be accomplished on their own. They need their colleagues and their colleagues need them. “It’s not only about the individual, it’s everyone wanting to make their colleagues look as good as humanly possible. It’s about playing supportively so that your colleague has their moment to shine.”

Even though two of the works on Friday’s concert were programmed long before Mitchell’s new position was ever discussed, it could not have been planned any better to send him off. “Programming American contemporary music is an enormous part of who I am. It could not be more perfect than to open the concert with Joan Tower’s *Made in America*.”

In addition to Tower’s work being a great composition, Mitchell feels it is important to program music written by women, especially when working with young people. “It’s

important to remember that COYO is comprised of 50% young men and 50% young women, so I have no problem shouting, ‘Girl power!’ during rehearsals.”

The concert will also feature COYO concerto competition winner Catharine Baek as soloist in Ravel’s *Piano Concerto in G*, a work that was influenced by the music of Gershwin. Mitchell said that while everyone who auditioned knocked the socks off the jury, the amazing thing about Catharine’s win is that she is a member of the Orchestra’s percussion section. “This is a testament to her, and to the caliber of young musicians that are in the orchestra,” Mitchell said. “I often talk about how important it is to be a good citizen of COYO, and Catharine is certainly one of them. She’s always ready to go, always positive, and always prepared.”

Mitchell also noted that of the six members of the percussion section, five are young women. “Twenty or thirty years ago, the idea of an all-female percussion section was unheard of. Today nobody thinks anything of it. Last year I called the five the Spice Girls — they showed up on Halloween dressed as the Spice Girls, which I just loved.”

Mitchell will literally be going out with a bang with a performance of Prokofiev’s *Symphony No. 5*, the first of the composer’s symphonies to be performed by the ensemble. “I have been thinking about this because there are two ways to end a work loudly — either with a long last note, or in tempo with a big final short one like this piece. I think the loud short note is going to be good for me and the orchestra because if there were a fermata on that final bar, it would give me the opportunity to reflect and savor the moment. And the symphony would last another five minutes because I wouldn’t want to let it go. But this ending provides a great lesson for all of us. When the time comes, the time comes — it’s over and we need to move on to our next things.”

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