

ChamberFest: Josef Špaček on music, travel, and social media

by Jarrett Hoffman



ChamberFest Cleveland brings a new face to town this week. Making his Cleveland debut on Thursday, June 29, violinist Josef Špaček will play three concerts in three days, performing works by Schnittke, Strauss, Mozart, and Dvořák as he helps bring the 2017 edition of ChamberFest to a close.

Born in Třebíč, Czech Republic, [Josef Špaček](#) has been concertmaster of the Czech Philharmonic since 2011 and was named Associate Artist by the orchestra in 2016. A graduate of Juilliard, Curtis, and the Prague Conservatory, he was a laureate of the International Queen Elisabeth Competition, and won top prizes at the Michael Hill and Carl Nielsen International Violin Competitions. As a soloist, he has performed with such ensembles as the Philadelphia Orchestra, Prague Philharmonia, and Orchestre Philharmonique du Luxembourg.

Špaček picked up the phone after wiping away the tears of his 9-month-old daughter and getting her to bed. “She’s asleep now, but one never knows. Babies kind of wake up any time they want,” he said with his trademark laugh.

Over the next twenty minutes of conversation, one theme that emerged was travel — the good, the fascinating, and the ugly. Whether playing in orchestra or as soloist, Špaček estimated that he’s performed in twenty countries over the past two years. He enjoys travel, especially when friends are involved. “It’s super nice when you know someone

locally and they can show you around from their perspective. Places where I don't know anyone, it's usually quite sad because you're on your own."

The violinist pointed out differences in style among orchestras around the world. "I had my first experience playing with a Japanese orchestra this past year, with the Tokyo Metropolitan Symphony, and I don't think I've ever heard an orchestra so prepared to rehearse. They knew their stuff incredibly well — every rhythm was so precise. It wasn't as spontaneous as other countries, I would say. When you play in my home country, it's a bit more like *play as you feel*. In more Western countries there's a lot of focus on sound, and U.S. orchestras are technically very efficient. In Italy, it's the most relaxed, and probably the most operatic, let's put it that way. It's fun."



Špaček experienced the flip side of travel in 2015, when his violin was confiscated by Russian customs officials at the Koltsovo airport near Yekaterinburg. "I never lost confidence in getting it back because I knew that even though I'd made a mistake, I had all the supporting documents," he said. "It was just a marathon of paperwork, and the amount of bureaucracy in Russia is almost impossible to imagine. There were a couple issues — first I'd committed a crime by just entering the country without declaring my instrument, and second they had pronounced my violin to be of cultural heritage value." (Watch him talk about the 1855 Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume instrument [here](#).) "In the end I

paid a fine — it was something stupidly ridiculous, like twenty dollars. So that was that, and it made media coverage everywhere.”

The youngest concertmaster in the history of the Czech Philharmonic, Špaček said that joining the orchestra was a smooth transition, thanks in part to the help of his father, a longtime cellist in the ensemble. “My dad had been working there for 25 years before I joined, so he introduced me to everyone after I won the job.”

He also credited his American education for preparing him for life in the Philharmonic. “In general, U.S. schools put a lot more emphasis on orchestra playing than in Europe. Especially coming from Curtis and learning one symphony a week, I went through so much repertoire as a student that when I joined a professional orchestra, I felt ready to take on that role. I also had confidence from studying abroad that I could bring something new to the orchestra. I felt my colleagues respected me from the start.”



Released in 2015, Špaček’s fourth CD is all-Czech: it features the Dvořák and Janáček Concertos and the Suk Fantasy with the Czech Philharmonic, conducted by the late Jiří Bělohlávek.

“As a Czech violinist, let’s put it straightforward, most presenters around the world will want you to play repertoire from your home country,” said Špaček. “But also it’s the music I grew up on. It feels very natural for a Czech musician to play Czech music, so this made sense as a first big project with orchestra.” Of the three pieces, he called the Dvořák the most famous, “though it’s not a superstar Czech concerto like his Cello Concerto, which everyone knows upside down and inside out.”

Closing our conversation, I told Špaček I’d enjoyed stalking his [Facebook](#) page, where videos show him playing violin to a certain spellbound baby (cute), catching some air off a ski ramp (cool), and eating what appears to be — ? “Worms and crickets,” he confirmed, “though I don’t know the type of worm. It’s sort of a trend. I kept noticing

people try it, and they said it's good, so I was like, why not? I think it's the seasoning and the oil it's fried in, but actually I was surprised how good it tasted. And I guess it's healthy too — a lot of protein.”

What are his thoughts on using social media?

“When I haven't posted in a really long time, I feel like I have to, otherwise people will forget I exist,” he said. “And you always need to think of a caption. Sometimes it's a bit of a struggle — if you don't have a good video, you have to have a good caption. If you have a great video, you don't want to screw it up with a bad caption.”

Špaček said he mostly posts about music, but he also likes to show people what he's doing when he's not practicing. “I'm quite picky,” he added. “You have to find the right balance — if you post too much, then people will unfollow you because they're getting spammed. But if you post just the right amount, I think people will enjoy what you have to say.

“Speaking of which,” Špaček said with a long laugh, “I haven't posted in awhile. Maybe I'll do that soon — maybe something from Cleveland would be good.”

Photos by Radovan Subin

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