

Pianist Aaron Diehl to make Cleveland Orchestra Debut

by Mike Telin



After jazz pianist and composer [Aaron Diehl](#) made his New York Philharmonic debut in September of 2016 performing George Gershwin's *Concerto in F*, Anthony Tommasini of the *New York Times* wrote: "Mr. Diehl played magnificently. He had brilliance when called for during jazz-tinged passages of Lisztian runs and octaves. The roomy freedom of Mr. Diehl's playing in bluesy episodes

was especially affecting. He also folded short improvised sections into the score, and it's hard to imagine that Gershwin would not have been impressed."

On Saturday, July 1 and Sunday, July 2 at Blossom Music Center, the Columbus, Ohio native will make his Cleveland Orchestra debut performing that same *Concerto* under the baton of Jahja Ling. The 8:00 pm concerts will also include Shostakovich's *Tahiti Trot*, Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess: A Symphonic Picture*, and Tchaikovsky's "1812" Overture.

During a recent telephone conversation Diehl, a graduate of the Juilliard School who studied jazz with Kenny Barron and Eric Reed, and classical piano with Oxana Yablonskaya, said that Gershwin's *Concerto* is a combination of late 19th- and early 20th-century neo-romanticism. "It also has elements of syncopation, blues, and what Jelly Roll Morton would call the Spanish tinge, or the habanera, the rhythm from which the Charleston is derived. Gershwin thrived on using all the musical resources that were available to him, and he infused all of that into this composition."

Diehl also believes the work represents the pinnacle of Gershwin's orchestral writing within the concerto format. "He did not orchestrate *Rhapsody in Blue*, that was Ferde Grofé, but he did spend a lot of time orchestrating the *Concerto in F*."

When Diehl was invited to perform the work with the New York Philharmonic, he wanted to bring his unique experiences as a jazz musician to his interpretation. "For example, certain types of rhythms that I'm playing all the time and especially early forms of jazz piano like stride — the things that even the best classical artists would not have the experience of playing. I also wanted to revisit the composers that influenced Gershwin — like Rachmaninoff, Tchaikovsky, and Ravel. Gershwin loved Ravel's music."

Interestingly, while Gershwin felt self-conscious about his "classical" music, many composers held it in high esteem. Both Nadia Boulanger and Maurice Ravel admired him so much that they rejected him as a student for fear that classical study might adversely affect his jazz-influenced style.

"Gershwin came from the Tin Pan Alley tradition, and I imagine that it might have been a bit overbearing for someone like him, even if he was influenced by those composers. My own experience in playing with the Philharmonic — and not being someone who is experienced in playing concertos with orchestras — is that it took a lot of focus in order not to feel too consumed by the grandiosity of it all. I had to understand that I had certain strengths I could bring to the table, and not to feel like I was competing with people like Yefim Bronfman or Murray Perahia. But there's a lot of room in Gershwin's music for people who come from a variety of musical backgrounds to express themselves."

From an early age, Diehl was exposed to all types of music at home — his parents bought a piano when he was young, and his grandfather was a jazz musician who played trombone and piano. "He wasn't a full-time musician, but he would often play gigs on the weekends. Columbus has a rich musical tradition. There's a good orchestra, and a fairly robust jazz scene. When I was growing up I was lucky to be exposed to many different styles of music, and to be able to hear them live."

Diehl began his formal piano lessons at the age of seven and quickly took a liking to the music of J.S. Bach. "I just loved the way it sounded," he said. "I liked how precise, yet so expressive it was. My mother had a box set of the Brandenburg Concerti, and I would wear out the discs from playing them so much. J.S. laid that groundwork for Western harmony. Of course, there were composers before him, but he highlighted all the possibilities of polyphonic music. He was the blueprint for

everyone we love today, like Brahms, Mendelssohn, Thelonious Monk, and Duke Ellington. I tell my students that they don't need to learn a ton of classical repertoire, but if they at least tackle Bach's Two- and Three-Part Inventions and analyze some of the chorale preludes, they'll be in good shape."

When not performing, composing, recording, and teaching, Diehl enjoys spending time flying his plane. "My dad owned an airplane and flew all the time, so it was just natural that I would become a pilot too. It's like music, when you're exposed to something at a young age you have a natural taking to it. I started flying when I was about fourteen. It's a passion of mine that I couldn't live without."

Does he ever fly himself to his gigs? "On occasion I do," he said. "Sometimes people don't believe me when I say this, but it is a way for me to decompress and get my mind off of whatever I have to do professionally. When you're alone in the air, all the worries and challenges you have are left down on the ground — it's exhilarating."

Photo by John Abbott

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