

## TCO at Blossom: 30 minutes with conductor Fabien Gabel and pianist Juho Pohjonen

by Jarrett Hoffman



This weekend's schedule at Blossom sports a fresh pair of Cleveland Orchestra debuts. On Saturday, August 19 at 8:00 pm at Blossom Music Center, [Fabien Gabel](#), music director of the Quebec Symphony Orchestra, will lead TCO in Ravel's *Boléro*,

Debussy's *Ibéria*, Florent Schmitt's *La Palais Hanté*, and Prokofiev's *Piano Concerto No. 1*, featuring [Juho Pohjonen](#). We spoke to the French conductor and the Finnish pianist in separate conversations — Gabel was spending time in New York City with his family, while Pohjonen was in Bridgehampton, NY, for his tenth festival of the summer.

As they get to know Northeast Ohio, the two stars of the program will also be getting to know each other. They've never performed together, though Gabel said he had the pleasure to hear Pohjonen play a recital in Paris. "He's played chamber music with some friends of mine, so I know him through them," said the conductor. "He's a fantastic musician, so I'm really looking forward to making music with him."

Asked to describe the ideal way a conductor-soloist relationship unfolds, Pohjonen emphasized working together in a chamber-music fashion, rather than one person leading or following. "It's a little more exciting that way," he said. After a short meeting about tempo and phrasing, Gabel prefers that talking takes a backseat during rehearsals. "It's about feeling, connection, and musical instinct, not stopping every ten bars with the orchestra to talk about music," he said. "The most important thing is to let the music speak."

A regular guest of such ensembles as the London, Detroit, and Toronto Symphony Orchestras, Gabel described the process of crafting a program as a guest conductor. “Usually we’re asked to plan around a concerto if we have a soloist. Being French and making my debut with the Orchestra, naturally I was asked to perform some French music, of which one of the highlights is of course Ravel’s *Boléro*. But it’s also interesting to perform lesser-known works. Debussy’s *Ibéria* is truly one of the best of the best of French music, even if it’s Spanish-inspired. It’s joyful music, very pleasant to listen to.”

To introduce something even newer, Gabel turned to Florent Schmitt’s *The Haunted Palace*, a study on Edgar Allan Poe’s poem of the same name. “In the beginning of the 20th century, Schmitt was as famous as Debussy or Ravel, and was one of Stravinsky’s favorite composers. But unfortunately he is totally neglected today, partly because in the Second World War, he had acquaintances with Germans. It’s very easy today to judge, but I think we have to separate the man and the artist, otherwise we shouldn’t play Wagner, we shouldn’t play Richard Strauss, we shouldn’t play the Russian composers from the Soviet era. Some bad men wrote *incredible* music.

“Today I think we must rediscover Florent Schmitt because his music is truly genius. He was independent — his language sounds obviously French, but it’s completely different from Ravel or Debussy. He composed so much, and he’s a master of the orchestra.” Gabel described the piece as Romantic, “really a tone poem in the strain of Liszt but with a French accent. It’s beautiful music written for a fantastic poem, and I hope everyone will enjoy it.”

The rest of the program is all-French except for Prokofiev, who did move to Paris in 1920, but that was eight years after completing his First Piano Concerto. “There’s nothing particularly French about it,” said Pohjonen. But the pianist said that like French music, it’s full of colors. “What I really like about the piece,” he added, “and what makes it so exciting is that Prokofiev didn’t really care what people thought.” (Critics at the work’s premiere were split — one wrote that it was a work of “wit, imagination and brilliance,” another that people should “buy the poor fellow a straitjacket.”)

Last year Pohjonen's Sibelius Piano Trio released an all-Finnish album to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the country's independence. The pianist said that his native country's music "feels very comfortable, like home." But he noted that it's not a large chunk of the repertoire since Sibelius's output for the instrument consisted of mostly small pieces.

A musician since age 2 ½, Pohjonen is the winner of the 2000 Stockholm International Young Artists Concerto Competition and the 2003 Dublin International Piano Competition. Aside from music, he named two other interests: the natural landscape around his home in Helsinki, and computer coding. His current project is a musical app that can respond to one's playing and modify aspects of the written part, and it's due "when it's done — it could be six months or eighteen months."

Back to Blossom, both artists expressed their thrill to be coming to Cleveland. "The Cleveland Orchestra was and still is an ensemble that is revered by every musician," said Gabel. "It's a huge pride to be invited to conduct this fantastic orchestra."

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