

## Randall Craig Fleischer leads “A Tribute to Ella Fitzgerald” at Blossom

by Jarrett Hoffman



“It’s a lovely day in Queens, New York,” conductor Randall Craig Fleischer said, answering his phone while walking with his daughter to the Joffrey Dance Center in an industrial part of the city. “No, actually it’s raining and noisy.”

Despite the gloomy weather, Fleischer talked animatedly over the next fifteen minutes about growing up in Northeast Ohio; his work in the genres of jazz, symphonic rock, and world music fusion; and his Cleveland Orchestra debut this Sunday.

On August 27 at 7:00 pm at Blossom Music Center, he’ll lead “A Tribute to Ella Fitzgerald,” featuring vocalists Capathia Jenkins, Harolyn Blackwell, and Aisha de Haas. Also the TCO debut for de Haas, this celebration of Lady Ella’s 100th birthday includes *Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered, Someone to Watch Over Me, The Lady Is a Tramp*, and *Summertime*.

Music Director of the Youngstown and Anchorage Symphonies and the Hudson Valley Philharmonic, Fleischer has appeared as a guest conductor with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and Israel Philharmonic. Formerly Assistant and Associate Conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra, he conducted Dvořák’s *Cello Concerto* with Mstislav Rostropovich as soloist during the NSO’s 1990 tour of Japan and the U.S.S.R. — the first time Rostropovich had played cello in Russia since his forced exile in 1972.

One day at Blossom in the early ‘80s, Fleischer caught a glimpse of that event in his life, almost as if in a crystal ball. “One of my first conducting jobs was leading a musical at Cain Park, and through a friend of a friend, I was able to get access to Cleveland Orchestra rehearsals at Blossom. Ironically, the very first rehearsal I heard was Rostropovich playing the Dvořák *Concerto*. Seven years later, we performed it seven times across three continents and recorded it for Sony Video. But the notion that I would

ever conduct that piece with this living god of classical music — I just never dreamed that was going to be my life.”

Among Fleischer’s many ties to Northeast Ohio, he was born and raised in Canton, is a graduate of Oberlin Conservatory, and has led the Youngstown Symphony for six seasons.

“My mom died two years ago, but my father still lives in Canton,” he said. “He was a jazz drummer and then for a brief time timpanist in the Canton Symphony, so he’s living vicariously through me now. He’s of course beside himself that I’m going to conduct The Cleveland Orchestra. Plus my wife Heidi was born and raised in Cleveland, so there’s lots of family coming to this concert.”

Asked about his relationship with jazz, Fleischer reflected on how his feelings toward the genre have changed over the course of his life. “I absolutely love jazz, and I’ve had the honor of working with some jazz royalty like Dizzy Gillespie, Gerry Mulligan, George Shearing, Chris Botti, and Patti Austin. But my journey to loving jazz is a circuitous one. My dad being a jazz drummer, I grew up with Sinatra in the house and tons of Ella recordings. But since it was my dad’s favorite music, of course I hated it. I loved rock and roll and Top 40 and all that kind of stuff — just a little teenager rebellion there. And then at Oberlin, with its phenomenal jazz program, I heard Sonny Rollins and some of the other more adventurous bebop artists. I just fell in love with jazz and I’ve been a fanatic ever since.”

Fleischer said that while Sunday’s concert will be an authentic Ella Fitzgerald tribute with some original Nelson Riddle arrangements, it’s not an attempt to copy the Queen of Jazz. “Nobody can do what she did. I mean, she was a *freakishly* genius talent. So instead of trying to find someone who could be Ella, we divided the show among three different singers, all with magnificent backgrounds.”

The conductor noted that de Haas and Jenkins have performed on Broadway, and Blackwell at the Met. “When Harolyn sings *Summertime*, it’s very true to the original. Aisha is a skat singer, and Capathia does everything — Broadway, rock, pop, gospel, jazz. There’s a wonderful variety, and we’re able to create some interaction among the three singers with jazzy vocal harmonies.”

In addition to his classical and jazz programming, Fleischer frequently explores symphonic rock and world music fusion. He’s worked with rock musicians like John Densmore of The Doors, Blondie, and Ani DiFranco, as well as with Native American artists R. Carlos Nakai, Burning Sky, and The Hawk Project. Stopping at a quiet corner

in Queens with no construction, Fleischer shared how he became interested in these crossover genres.

“It’s just who I am,” he said. “I’m moved very deeply by so many different kinds of music. Since I was a kid, I’ve been a fan of classic rock and roll — Zeppelin, Hendrix, Santana — and I’m also into more contemporary bands like Muse.”

His interest in Native American music dates from a side trip to the Grand Canyon, when he was auditioning for the Flagstaff Symphony. “It was a freezing-cold day, and there was this beautiful, haunting native flute music playing in the gift shop. My wife Heidi said, ‘You know what, if you get the job, you should explore this. There’s something deeply spiritual here.’ I did, and it was a phenomenal journey.

“There isn’t anybody alive who loves Brahms, Mozart, Stravinsky, and Shostakovich more than I do, and it’s an honor to conduct those great classical standards. But I’m curious about all kinds of ways to use a symphony orchestra to explore new avenues of music.”

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