

Pianist Jonathan Biss to premiere new concerto with The Cleveland Orchestra

By Mike Telin



When pianist Jonathan Biss pitched the idea to the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra of commissioning five composers to write new concertos, each inspired by one of Beethoven's five concertos, he thought it was a "pie in the sky" suggestion. Much to his surprise the SPCO ran with the idea. "It's so exciting because I could imagine an organization thinking, 'Great idea but it's just too daunting,' but they were undaunted by it," Biss said by telephone.

The pianist said that he was equally surprised at the rate at which the *Beethoven/5* project expanded. "It's mushroomed beyond what I could have ever imagined. Something like fifteen

different orchestras have joined as partners with one concerto or another, and The Cleveland Orchestra is a co-commissioner of this one."

On Thursday, November 30 at 7:30 pm at Severance Hall, Fabio Luisi will lead the Cleveland premiere of [Salvatore Sciarrino](#)'s *Piano Concerto: Il sogno di Stradella* with [Jonathan Biss](#) as soloist. The concert will also include Bruckner's *Symphony No. 4* ("Romantic"). The program will be repeated on Saturday, December 2 at 8:00 pm. Tickets are available [online](#).

Inspired by Beethoven's Fourth Concerto, Sciarrino's work marks the midway point of the project for Biss, who has already premiered concertos by Timo Andres and Sally Beamish since *Beethoven/5* was launched in 2016. During the next two years, the pianist will premiere concertos by Caroline Shaw and Brett Dean.

Biss explained that the title of Sciarrino's concerto, *Il sogno di Stradella* or "the dream of Stradella," refers to the Italian Baroque composer Alessandro Stradella (1639-1682).

“He’s been more or less forgotten, but he was fairly influential in his day and Sciarrino has been quite taken with him over the past few years. Although Sciarrino has been an important member of the avant-garde going back to the 1970s, he’s always been deeply interested in the music of the past.”

The pianist said that during the beginning and end of the concerto, Sciarrino writes in his own inventive musical language and uses many extended techniques, especially in the winds and strings, but the middle of the work is not so easy for him to describe. “It’s like Sciarrino is looking backward and Stradella is looking forward, and the meeting of these two very different musical languages makes for a striking and unusual effect. I can’t honestly name another piece I’ve ever heard that I would say it resembles.”

Biss said that *Il sogno di Stradella* is better described as a piece for piano and ensemble — it’s scored for strings and single winds and brass. But when asked if there are any recognizable references to Beethoven’s Fourth Concerto, he said that Stradella’s is in g minor and Beethoven’s is in G major, and that’s where the musical references end.

“When people ask that question, I’ve been saying that Sally Beamish’s *City Stanzas* makes explicit reference to Beethoven 1 — the last movement is a riff on the material from that concerto. Then there is Timo Andres’ *The Blind Banister*, which responds to Beethoven 2. While there are no direct quotations in it, the piece is based on certain ideas Timo has about the way in which Beethoven’s cadenza corresponds to his piece, and the way in which their different languages come together. The Sciarrino has an even more oblique or obscure relationship with the Beethoven. I would say it’s more of a dialogue with the past than it is about the Fourth Concerto.”

When it came to selecting composers for the project, Biss said that because Beethoven’s music is so all-encompassing, it was important for him to choose composers that represent a broad range of styles. “No matter what idiom someone writes in, they will have something to say about Beethoven. I also needed composers whose music I am drawn to, and for me that has never meant a particular style — I’ve always been interested in a range of music.”

Did any of the composers turn down the commissions? “I was ecstatic that everyone said yes,” he said. “They all embraced the germ of an idea that was already there. The three composers who have already written their concerti said that it focused their imagination in a way that they found useful and that they enjoyed. I think it’s been a positive experience for them, and for me it’s been just amazing to watch three different creative minds at work. I don’t have the tiniest bit of compositional talent, so seeing someone turn nothing into something is the most amazing magic act.”

While learning a new concerto every year has been taxing, Biss said it has also been invigorating. “So much of the music I play is a central part of the literature, and there’s such a tradition behind it. No matter how much I tell myself that I’m trying to start from scratch when I learn a Beethoven sonata, there is no question that listening for years to the piece played by people I admire has filtered into my brain. I find the process of learning a piece that has no tradition behind it has taught me so much about how to work my way into a composer’s imagination. It’s taxing but I get more from it than it takes from me.”

An unexpected and exciting outcome of *Beethoven/5* is the number of orchestras programming the concertos that have already been premiered. “Timo Andres’ concerto is two years old and has now been taken up by many orchestras who were not the original commissioners,” Biss said. “My hope for these pieces is that bit by bit they’ll find their way into the repertoire. For me, a wonderful day will be when I go and listen to one of these pieces played by someone else. I love playing them but I don’t feel proprietary about them. What I want most is for them to have a life beyond me.”

Those who have followed Jonathan Biss’ career know that Beethoven has been a central figure in the pianist’s repertoire. “There has never been another composer whose range of expression has been so broad, and the evolution of his language is nothing short of staggering. And his ability to encompass every corner of human feeling — I don’t think there is anyone else like him.”

Biss is now sharing his love of Beethoven with students worldwide through his Internet lecture series, “Exploring Beethoven’s Sonatas.” The lectures are part of Coursera, an online service through the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, where Biss now serves on the faculty. “This is such a rich topic that when I’m preparing the lectures, I have to think about what to leave out.”

An avid writer, Biss said he is a fan of *The New Yorker*’s Mary Norris, a.k.a. The Comma Queen, and confessed to having a “special” relationship with the semicolon. “I like long, complex sentences, and the only way that I can organize them so that anybody else can follow them at all is with the assistance from my best friend the semicolon; there are just so many conjunctions you can include in a sentence before people get angry at you.”

Published on ClevelandClassical.com November 28, 2017.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)