

The Cleveland Orchestra to host Martin Luther King Celebration Concert

by Mike Telin



The Cleveland Orchestra will present its annual Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration Concert under the direction of Franz Welser-Möst on Sunday, January 14 at 7:00 pm in Severance Hall. All of the free tickets to the event have been distributed, but the program will be broadcast live on WCLV, 104.9 FM and WCPN,

90.3 FM. The concert will also be broadcast on Cleveland Public Television WVIZ on January 26.

Sunday's concert will feature bass-baritone Ryan Speedo Green, actor James Pickens Jr., and the Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration Chorus under the direction of William Henry Caldwell. The program includes Beethoven's Overture to *Egmont*, Mendelssohn's "Lord God of Abraham" from *Elijah*, George Walker's *Lyric for Strings*, Verdi's "Va pensiero" from *Nabucco*, Respighi's "Pines of the Appian Way," the fourth movement of Mendelssohn's "*Reformation*" *Symphony*, Julia Ward Howe's *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, and James Weldon Johnson's and John Rosamond Johnson's *Lift Every Voice and Sing*.

"There are a lot of new things happening at the concert this year," Chorus Director William Henry Caldwell said during a recent telephone conversation. "I'm especially excited about commissioned arrangements by Charles Floyd of *Down by the Riverside* and *Precious Lord*. To have the opportunity to present those to the

Cleveland community for this celebration speaks volumes about how much The Cleveland Orchestra thinks of this choir.”

Caldwell said that he looks forward to once again working with Franz Welser-Möst. “I conducted the Central State University Chorus for 34 years, and we were invited to perform on this concert, I think during Franz’s first time conducting it. He wanted a program that included not only gospel music but other styles as well, so they brought me onboard.”

As in the past, this year’s Chorus is made up of 150 singers from the community at large. “Singers from a lot of Cleveland-area churches will be represented as well as members of the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus.”

Caldwell noted that rehearsal time for the chorus is very tight. “We get together over the two weekends before the concert, and rehearse on Sunday afternoon at Severance Hall. It is a lot of music to put together in a very short amount of time, and we need to maintain the standard that the Orchestra is accustomed to, so the pressure is on.”



The conductor said that it is important to select repertoire that the members of the chorus can relate to. “To get a choir like this to appreciate the music, you have to get them off of the page. There are a lot of members that do read music, and a lot that don’t — but everyone needs to have it in their hearts before they can really share it with an audience. I prepare them to have a strong knowledge of the text, and that helps get the message across. The artistry comes through when it is presented that way.”

Music was always an important part of Martin Luther King Jr’s life. His mother, Alberta Williams King, was the choir organist and director at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. “She was sitting at the organ in that church when she was assassinated,” Caldwell said. “A lot of people don’t remember that but I do. But Ebenezer, being the church that it was, always had great music. Not just hymns, spirituals and gospel, but classical music was an important part of the program as well. This was an educated black church and Dr. King was exposed to so many different facets of life. And of course his wife, Coretta Scott King, was a singer who studied at the New England Conservatory.”

Caldwell said that MLK’s favorite song was the Rev. Thomas A. Dorsey’s *Precious Lord*. “Sometimes when people sing it they stray away from what Thomas Dorsey intended by putting contemporary twists on it. But Charles Floyd’s arrangement captures and maintains the true essence of what the song is about. In fact when you hear the opening at the concert, you’re going to see that he knows what Thomas Dorsey wanted.”

How did Caldwell find his way to choral music? “Oh Lord,” he said chuckling, “how much time do you have?” The conductor said that he is a product of the Demopolis, Alabama public school system where, after integration, he graduated from Demopolis High School. “My father was a sharecropper, so you know he was not that far removed from slavery. My upbringing was that you had to go to church on Sunday, and we went to Eastern Star Baptist Church where Ralph David Abernathy, who was also a very close friend of Dr. King’s, was the pastor. So I grew up going to church and listening to the choir. When I was a little boy my father said that I needed to sing, so I ended up taking the lead during a lot of the songs in church.”

Caldwell went on to earn degrees from Stillman College and The University of Texas in Austin. He did further study at The Ohio State University and The University of Cincinnati-College Conservatory of Music and completed advanced studies in Lucca, Italy and Vevey, Switzerland. “My background is that of a classically trained baritone and of the pieces we’re performing on Sunday, “Lord God of Abraham” from *Elijah*,

Down by the Riverside, and *Precious Lord* are right in my voice range — it's a pleasure preparing those pieces because I can sing them myself.”

Closing our conversation, William Henry Caldwell said that for The Cleveland Orchestra to take on this project every year “speaks volumes about how important it is for them to bring the community together to fulfill the dream of Dr. Martin Luther King. They're making a big effort to let people know that we remember, we're with you, and this is your Orchestra.”

On Monday, January 15 from 12:30 pm until 5:00 pm, the Orchestra will mark the civil rights leader's birthday with a free Community Open House at Severance Hall. The afternoon will include ongoing activities in the Smith Lobby and the Bogomolny-Kozerefski Grand Foyer, in addition to the following scheduled performances: 12:30 pm Cleveland Orchestra Youth Chorus; 1:15 pm Cleveland School of the Arts R. Nathaniel Dett Choir; 2:00 pm El Sistema@Rainey; 2:45 pm Cleveland Classical Guitar Society Students; 3:30 pm Lafayette Carthon and Faith; 4:15 pm Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra.

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