

**This week at Severance:
a conversation with Jean-Yves Thibaudet**

by Mike Telin



Over the years Jean-Yves Thibaudet has developed what he calls a “beautiful relationship” with The Cleveland Orchestra. “There are the recordings we did in the ‘90s of all the Rachmaninoff works for piano and orchestra, and we’ve done so many concertos over the years — but never this one.”

On Thursday, February 22 at 7:30 pm at Severance Hall, the French pianist will perform Ravel’s *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand*. The all-Ravel concert, under the

direction of Matthias Pintscher, will also include the *Suite from Mother Goose* and the complete ballet *Daphnis and Chloë*. The program will be repeated on Friday and Saturday at 8:00 pm. Tickets are available [online](#).

Although Thibaudet had learned all of Ravel’s works for solo piano as well as the G-major concerto by the time he was 15, he avoided tackling the left-hand concerto. “I didn’t even have the desire to learn it,” he said during a recent telephone conversation from Boston, where he was scheduled to perform the piece that afternoon. “I thought, why would I play a piece for one hand? And it looked so difficult and unfriendly, so I found every excuse not to learn it.”

Then, in the early 1990s Thibaudet ran out of excuses when a programming conversation with the director of the Proms in London — who had invited him to play many times — led to an ultimatum. “I remember this very clearly. He said, ‘Why don’t you play the left-hand concerto?’ I said I don’t play it and suggested the G-major, and he said no. We went through all the repertoire, then he said, ‘OK, for

this year it will be the Ravel left hand or nothing.’ So I thought, OK, it’s a fabulous piece, and I learned it.”

The pianist said that over time he has come to “adore” the work because of its intense power and sheer beauty. “It’s a challenge to write for one hand that’s competing with a full orchestra, and it’s a challenge that Ravel completely mastered. I think if most people close their eyes and listen, they will think you are playing with at least two hands — if not more. It goes everywhere on the piano, from the top notes to the bottom. It’s just genius how he made it happen.”

Written between 1929 and 1930, the Concerto was commissioned by concert pianist Paul Wittgenstein, who had lost his right arm during World War I. Thibaudet noted that while Ravel was not able to enlist as a soldier due to his health, he did join the French forces as an ambulance driver.

“He lost a lot of friends and was very affected by that. And the mood of this concerto reflects those dark times. What is fascinating is that he was in the middle of writing the G-major when he got the commission from Mr. Wittgenstein, so he stopped the G, wrote this one, and then finished the G. It’s amazing that he went back and forth between the two works that are from completely opposite worlds. The G-major’s like the sunshine and happiness, and this is complete darkness. But in a way, they complement each other, and both have a real jazz influence.”

In addition to being technically difficult, Thibaudet said the Concerto is physically demanding because of the pressure that is placed on the player’s left hand and arm for prolonged periods of time. “There are many pieces I can just look at and play the next day because I’ve played them so much. With this piece that’s impossible because you need to bring up the muscles in the left arm, hand, and wrist. It’s almost an athletic piece to play and I need — a week is the best — but at least five days to bring it back.”

The pianist said he begins that process by practicing a half hour to 45 minutes the first day and an hour the second day, continuing to add fifteen minutes of practice time each day. “It’s like building up muscles when you go to the gym. You don’t just take the heaviest weight and lift it — you’d kill yourself, and this is the same thing. It’s very demanding and you need to be careful. If anything hurts, you immediately stop or it could be very dangerous. Even before concerts I warm up both hands, then fifteen minutes with the left hand and build it up, and then boom, I go onstage.”

This week’s concerts will give Thibaudet another opportunity to work with his good friend Matthias Pintscher. “We’ve known each other for a long time. I’ve played

some of his music, but I only worked with him one time as a conductor and that was in Stuttgart. I'm happy to be joining him in Cleveland, and we're doing the same concerto later with the Chicago Symphony. He's had a long relationship with Cleveland as a composer and conductor." (Pintscher was the Daniel R. Lewis Young Composer Fellow from 2000 to 2002.)

During the past ten years, teaching and the passing on of his life experiences have become more important to Thibaudet's career. As Artist-in-Residence at the Colburn School in Los Angeles, he does some teaching, presents public master classes, and coaches for and performs in a chamber music concert with the students.

"I had such amazing teachers. One of them was a student and friend of Ravel's who would always speak of him in the present — I would feel like the door would open and Ravel would be there. There are so many things that I'd like to share with the students and teaching gives me so much pleasure. I feel like I'm learning so much as well. I was so lucky to start this collaboration with Colburn and they were very kind to build something around me because I'm not on the faculty. They came up with this idea of artist-in-residence. There are no rules and everything is possible. I also do Q&A sessions — if you are a pianist of course you have to play the piano, but there are so many things you need to know to have a career that we don't think about. They like to discuss things and we have a good time."

Thibaudet has also established a scholarship to provide financial aid for students in Colburn's Academy. "The idea of Colburn is that everything should be free for the students, and it is. But this is for the Academy which is for younger people, and they don't use the endowment for that. 14 to 18 is a critical age and this can make a huge difference in their development. So when I travel and hear a genius talent somewhere I can say, 'Hey, we'll take you. Come to Colburn and everything will be paid.' It's not just for pianists but any instrument. That's the way we wanted it because whenever I feel talent is there, I can help. The scholarship is beautiful. I have some wonderful friends I have met over the years and some of them have been extremely generous with their donations."

In closing our conversation Thibaudet said he wanted to tell a quick story about his first time in Cleveland. "It's a very special place to me — it's the first city I came to in the United States. In 1979 I arrived with my mother and my teacher for what in those days was called the Casadesus Competition [now the Cleveland International Piano Competition]. So we got here and took a taxi to the hotel. The driver was a very nice guy. He asked where we were coming from — I said France — and he asked if we were here on holiday. I said that I am a musician and here for a piano competition. Then he almost stopped his cab and he turned around and said, 'Sir, do

you know that in Cleveland we have the best orchestra in the world?’ I said yes, I know. It was amazing to have that pride from a taxi driver — usually they talk about the baseball team, but he was so proud of his orchestra. And I’ve never seen that anywhere else.” Thibaudet went on to win Second Prize.

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