

Kent/Blossom Music Festival: a conversation with the Emerson Quartet's Philip Setzer

by Delaney Meyers



On Wednesday, July 18 at 7:30 pm, The Emerson String Quartet will perform with cellist Jerry Grossman in Ludwig Recital Hall as part of Kent/Blossom Music Festival's 50th anniversary concert season. I spoke with Philip Setzer, violinist of the Emerson, by telephone and asked about the program and his personal connections with KBMF as an alumnus. The Quartet is this year's Kulas Guest Artist.

Setzer said that "the theme, if there is one, is of loss and mourning, but also a celebration of life." The all-20th century first half will open with the adagio from Barber's string quartet, a work that is very meaningful to the ensemble. Setzer said that the string orchestra version, known as *Adagio for Strings*, "has become iconic as a piece of national and international mourning."

The Emerson have their own special relationship to the Adagio, as they were asked by Jane Moss, artistic director at Lincoln Center, to perform it there following 9/11. "So many people needed to hear music at that point," Setzer said. "It was something I'll never forget. Everybody, including the members of the quartet, had tears in their eyes."

The second of three "relatively concise but powerful pieces" on the first half is Bartók's *String Quartet No. 3*, which Setzer described as "a masterpiece of concision and modernism." It is unique in the program — the composer's writing based in folk music — and fits well between the Barber and the Shostakovich, Setzer said.

Shostakovich's *String Quartet No. 8* will bring the evening back into a somber space, "Part of it depicts what happened to Jewish people in the Second World War, but the

quartet is also about Shostakovich's and the Russian people's struggle under the Stalinist regime," Setzer said.

The second half of the program will be devoted to the Schubert cello quintet, which Setzer said is his favorite piece. "It's like a novel. It has everything that you could possibly want from any piece of music. It's one of the last things he wrote, and the way Schubert overcomes everything by the end of the piece leaves us all with hope. There's nothing more heavenly than that slow movement."



Playing with Jerry Grossman, principal cellist of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, will also be meaningful for the violinist and the quartet. Grossman and Setzer were at Blossom together in the summer of 1969, where they became good friends playing the Brahms f-minor piano quintet.

Setzer recounted a memory from that summer, after a performance of Brahms' c-minor piano quartet. "I remember walking with my mother in the parking lot outside, which, in a kind of horrible way, was very close to the area where that student was shot the following spring" — something that was also on his mind whilst programming Wednesday's concert. "I said to my mother, I think this is what I want to do with my life: play chamber music. I just had never felt anything like I had felt that summer playing in those groups."

Setzer recalled several other works he played that summer: Stravinsky's *A Soldier's Tale*, coached and conducted by Robert Marcellus, and Beethoven Op. 59, No. 1, coached by Jaime Laredo. "A couple of months later I started at Juilliard and met Eugene Drucker, the other violinist in the Quartet, and we've been playing together ever since."

Returning to Northeast Ohio is “doubly nostalgic” for Setzer. Not only was his chamber music experience at KBMF vitally important to him, but he also grew up in Cleveland, where his parents played with The Cleveland Orchestra. Wednesday’s concert is sure to be a moving experience for all: “When you hear music that has to do with death it should make you sad, but it should also make you feel happy that you’re still here and can enjoy life, and still have that gift. I think that’s something that Barber and Shostakovich and Schubert gave us with these three pieces.”

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