

Cleveland Orchestra: a conversation with Simon Trpčeski

by Mike Telin



The sounds of Russian music will fill Blossom Music Center on Saturday, August 11 at 8:00 pm when Vasily Petrenko leads The Cleveland Orchestra in Liadov's *Baba-Yaga*, Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* and Prokofiev's *Symphony No. 5*. Tickets are available [online](#).

The concert also marks the return visit to the Blossom stage by pianist [Simon Trpčeski](#). "I made my Cleveland Orchestra debut at Blossom playing Rachmaninoff's second concerto and it was an honor to be asked to perform that same piece the following year on the subscription series at Severance Hall," the pianist said by telephone from California, where he was premiering a new concerto at the Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music.

"It's not just my opinion, but Cleveland is one of the top orchestras in the world, and Blossom is such a beautiful venue. This time I am playing a different concerto, but it is by the same composer," the Macedonian pianist said. "And to play it with my good friend Vasily — we've played and recorded all of the Rachmaninoff concertos — is going to be a fantastic musical journey."

Trpčeski noted that the *Rhapsody* is an example of how adept Rachmaninoff was at writing fantasies. "Like many composers, he was fascinated by Paganini's theme from his *Caprice #24*. He had a natural talent for writing variations, and throughout his life he was preoccupied with the *Dies Irae*. The concerto also has some jazz influences."

Composed in three primary episodes, the work is full of amazing mood changes from one variation to the other, but it is the famous 18th variation that never fails to enthrall listeners, the pianist said. “Because the variation that precedes it is very dark, it’s deeply touching when it begins. But Rachmaninoff had a talent for capturing the hearts of the audience.”

Trpčeski feels the Rhapsody exemplifies Rachmaninoff’s genius both as a composer and as a pianist. “It’s full of jokes, but they’re always in good taste, and he never leaves the piano unsupported by the orchestra. It is a challenge for everyone involved — there are so many tempo changes and balance issues to be aware of — it’s all about teamwork. But it’s a fantastic piece and I’m certain that Vasily and The Orchestra will make it fun for me to enjoy as the soloist.”

In addition to the Cabrillo Festival, Trpčeski and Petrenko will team up for a performance of Beethoven’s 5th concerto with the Chicago Symphony on August 4 at the Ravinia Festival, and he will perform Rachmaninoff’s Rhapsody with the Aspen Philharmonic Orchestra and conductor Jun Märkl on Wednesday, August 8.

“Cabrillo, Ravinia, Aspen, and Blossom are all wonderful festivals, and in the U.S., people show such a respect for the music, so I’m very much looking forward to all of these concerts.”

Regarding the premiere of that new concerto at Cabrillo, Trpčeski said he is honored to have been invited, and to be able to present new works is always very meaningful, because it is important to provide composers with the opportunity to have their works performed.

“My dear friend and colleague Cristian Macelaru, who is the music director of the Festival this season, suggested premiering a new concerto and I suggested my composer friend and fellow Macedonian Pande Shahov. He teaches at London’s Royal Academy of Music, and he has written a concerto that offers a contemporary take on Macedonian folk music. The piece is a kaleidoscope that includes both his vision of the impressionism of Debussy, and the lyric moments of folk music. It’s full of the 7/8 and 9/8 time signatures that are common to the folk music, but Pande does this in a sophisticated way.”

Throughout our conversation the soft-spoken pianist returned to the theme of teamwork, noting that at heart, he is a chamber musician. This attribute did not go unnoticed by critics during his recent tour to Australia and New Zealand. Regarding his performance of the Grieg Concerto, a reviewer wrote that his playing “sounded like it was part of the fabric of the orchestra rather than a rival to it.”

When asked about his ‘we’re all in it together’ mentality, Trpčeski said it is rooted in his upbringing. “I have always been like this,” he said. “I grew up modestly, but every other night we’d gather with family and friends for a meal, a drink, and to talk. There was always singing and dancing. Yes, it was modest, but they were very happy times. Of course, we are all different, but that is the lifestyle of Macedonians.”

He added that he has always “loved” being as one with his colleagues. “I have always believed that there is no point of being a showman just for the sake of showing off. It’s just not me. When you play with orchestra the piece was written for everyone, so you need to give them space.”

Trpčeski is a proud Macedonian — in September 2011 he was awarded the first-ever title National Artist of the Republic of Macedonia. “It is a small country but it has a huge history, and each person — from many fields — who has received this award has contributed to the world, and those contributions make the nation proud. It also shows the respect that they have for me and everyone who has received it. We all do what we do out of love, and doing something that is good for society should be applauded.”

The pianist has brought his national pride to his latest musical project, [Makedonissimo](#) (Truly Macedonian). “These are wonderful folk songs and dances that I personally chose and Pande Shahov transcribed,” he said. “Of course I play the piano but I also narrate.” The ensemble made their debut at the [Ludwigsburger Schlossfestspiele](#) in Germany; they have also performed at London’s Wigmore Hall. In addition to Trpčeski, the project features Hidan Mamudov (clarinet, saxophone, and Kaval), Aleksander Krapovski (violin), Alexander Somov (cello), and Vlatko Nushev (percussion). “These are all classically trained musicians who now live all over the world. I’ve wanted to do this project for a while and I’m very proud of it.”

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