

## James Gaffigan returns to Northeast Ohio to conduct Cleveland Orchestra at Blossom

by Jarrett Hoffman



“The Cleveland Orchestra, no matter who’s conducting it, is an extraordinary instrument and an extraordinary group of human beings,” said conductor James Gaffigan during a recent telephone conversation.

Chief Conductor of the Luzerner Sinfonieorchester, Gaffigan will lead a concert at Blossom this Saturday, August 18 at 8:00 pm — a reunion from his time as the Orchestra’s Assistant Conductor from 2003 to 2006.

“The Cleveland Orchestra was the main teacher in my career,” the conductor said. “They’ve helped mold my way of thinking about conducting an orchestra, and my concepts of sound, transparency, and what an orchestra can do. I think The Cleveland Orchestra is the definition of a great, versatile orchestra.”

The conductor also emphasized the trust he built with the musicians during his time in Cleveland, at an early stage of his career. “It was a fragile moment in my life. I mean, when you’re 23 years old, you’re very susceptible to everything around you. If you have a bad concert, people will remember it and your career might be over. Bad concerts come from a number of things, but mostly lack of preparation and lack of ability. If you physically can’t do it, you’re not going to go very far.”

Part of what Gaffigan loves about conducting is getting to work with other musicians. “I think the whole basis of conducting is facilitating people working well together,” he said. His collaborative schedule has recently starred pianists: Beatrice Rana in June and Daniil Trifonov in July. And on Saturday he’ll take the stage with Stephen Hough for Mendelssohn’s First Piano Concerto.

“They’re all three extraordinary musicians, and they’re all very different — they’re at different stages in their lives, and they play very different repertoire. All three are brilliant chamber musicians, so they understand the give-and-take between the orchestra and the soloist. And understand working with a conductor — a lot of young pianists starting off their careers are not flexible. They have their way of doing it, and it’s very hard for them to change. These three soloists are very successful not just because of the level of their musicianship, but also their collaborative potential. They’re wonderful people to work with. Stephen is a lovely person — he’s a great author and composer, and he’s witty, and it all shows in his music-making.”

Both Hough and Gaffigan are big fans and advocates of the music of Felix Mendelssohn. “In general, I think musicians should be doing more Mendelssohn. I don’t think people give him enough credit. There’s an incredible lightness and fantasy to his music, including this piano concerto. There are heavy moments, there are dramatic moments, but in the end Mendelssohn is one of these special, light, Germanic composers, and I think he started a whole beautiful tradition of writing for orchestra. It’s like a continuation of Mozart’s tradition but with more complex harmonies.”

The concerto will be preceded on Saturday by Barber’s *Second Essay*, and followed by Sibelius’ Second Symphony. “I think programs need to make sense from beginning to end,” Gaffigan said. “I always say it’s like making a great menu or wine pairing. If you have too much of one thing on the program, the audience walks away feeling stuffed, overwhelmed, or kind of agitated. But if you have a nice balance, people walk away happy and feeling good about what they heard.”

Applying the meal metaphor to this program, Gaffigan called the Barber “a little bit of an appetizer that whets the appetite for what’s coming later.” The Mendelssohn? “It serves as a Classical intermezzo. The main course is Sibelius 2, which is this fantastic symphony from beginning to end. It takes the listener on an extreme journey, like a great novel does. I think the audience will love it, even people who don’t necessarily know or like Sibelius. You can’t deny loving this piece — the ending is extraordinary, and the opening is some of the best string writing known to man.”

Barber and Sibelius wrote in different musical languages, but Gaffigan hears much in common between the composers. “They’re both trying to achieve these vast open spaces.

Sibelius does it with very interesting orchestration and strange, repetitive rhythms. Barber does it with these open harmonies that kind of represent the huge American landscape of open plains. I think there's no doubting when you hear Barber that it's Barber, and the same thing goes for Sibelius. They're two of the strongest personalities in our vernacular."

What makes the music of Sibelius especially fascinating to Gaffigan is the way he "pushes the boundaries of the language we know as Western music — so far at times that it's almost alien. It's so rare to hear that at this point in time in the early 1900s, late 1800s. It's extreme, whereas Barber takes the American language that we know and romanticizes it, and has no shame about doing that. He was an extraordinary composer."

I asked Gaffigan about a recent YouTube [video](#) posted by Vox, in which he explains the role of the conductor in just five minutes. "That was a great project," he said. "I went into the studio and we just talked about conducting for an hour. Then they put the video together, which I thought was really well-crafted for the lay listener or the person who doesn't normally go to a concert. I wish there were also a more detailed version besides this very short one because they did such a good job."

We closed our conversation by circling back to Cleveland. "It's the definition of an American city that's changing, and it's an American city that appreciates the arts. I think The Cleveland Orchestra could only flourish in a place like Cleveland. It was the perfect environment for this amazing orchestra and amazing concert hall and summer venue. I'm always very happy to come back. It's like a homecoming, and it's always very emotional for me."

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