

**Summers@Severance:
10 minutes with conductor Jonathan Cohen**

by Jarrett Hoffman



Québec’s chamber orchestra Les Violons du Roy got its name from France’s royal court orchestra of yore. But the group’s new leader, Jonathan Cohen, is not a Gallic king — neither in reality nor in ego.

“I come from a chamber music perspective and a chamber music world,” the Manchester-born conductor said during a recent telephone conversation from rainy London. For him, music-making should be a shared endeavor with shared responsibility. “It’s not like I’m ordering people to play and they just interpret it. We do that together, and I guide the process — that’s how I like to work.”

Cohen and pianist Kristian Bezuidenhout will make their Cleveland Orchestra debuts on Friday, August 24 at 7:00 pm in the last of the season’s Summers@Severance outings — “@” Severance Hall, with air conditioning, and without crickets. The program of Handel, Haydn, and Mozart represents Cohen’s specialty: music before late Beethoven. “That kind of music is my great passion and love. And in my opinion, most of it is chamber music.”

He pointed out that prior to those late years of Beethoven, conducting often came from a violinist or harpsichordist. “The idea of a conductor as a silent musician waving a stick — that just didn’t exist.”



First up on Friday evening will be the Overture to the *Occasional Oratorio*. “I was really keen to have a bit of Handel in there,” Cohen said. “This overture was almost designed like a military piece to celebrate a victory in battle, so it has this great march for the trumpets. I think it’s a nice way to open the concert.”

Using composers’ names as adjectives can bring out writers’ latest gray hairs, or at least their latest squiggly red lines of spell check. Two of those adjectives came up in our conversation, when Cohen described Haydn’s *Piano Concerto in D* as ‘Mozartian,’ and Mozart’s *Symphony No. 25* as ‘Haydn-esque.’

“Mozart was 17 when he wrote that symphony — and of course, Haydn was the great symphonic master,” the conductor said. “I think there’s a strong influence there with this very turbulent *Sturm und Drang* style. The same goes for the piano concerto: Haydn wrote it late on, and Mozart had already made quite an impact in that genre. It’s interesting to compare them together.”

With Cohen preparing for his first season leading *Les Violons du Roy*, we also spoke about the joys and challenges of the conducting profession. “I love meeting new people,” he said. “I think musicians everywhere, from different cultures, share some things in common — as human beings, they’re generally very open, expressive, creative types, and I love working in that environment. You have to be reasonably robust to be on the road a lot, but the great payoff is the wonderful opportunity to make great music with people, and that’s what keeps me going.”

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