

An intimate look at the music of Jeffrey Rathbun before The Cleveland Orchestra's premiere of *Pantheon*

by David Kulma



Most famous orchestral composers are people who either conduct or listen to orchestras rather than play in them. But there is a small cohort of professional orchestra musicians who step into the composer spotlight.

After attending organ school, and before becoming a well-known composer, Antonín Dvořák served as a violist in the orchestra of the Bohemian Provisional Theater for a few years. Carl Nielsen sat in the second violin section of the Royal Danish Opera until he was 40, playing the first performances of some of his own works.

[Jeffrey Rathbun](#), now beginning his 29th season as assistant principal oboe with The Cleveland Orchestra, also fits into this mold. His *Pantheon*, commissioned by the Orchestra for its centennial celebrations, will be premiered this weekend.

Music director Franz Welser-Möst will open the season with the new work on Thursday, September 20 at 7:30 pm and Saturday, September 22 at 8:00 pm at Severance Hall. The program also includes Tchaikovsky's *Suite from Swan Lake* and Hans Abrahamsen's *Left, alone*, a concerto for the left hand that will feature pianist Alexandre Tharaud. The program will be repeated in Oberlin's Finney Chapel on Friday, September 21 at 7:30 pm as part of the Oberlin Artist Recital Series.

After earning two oboe degrees — studying with the late, great John Mack at the Cleveland Institute of Music for his master’s — and holding positions with other orchestras, Jeffrey Rathbun landed the job of Mack’s assistant in Cleveland in 1990 (he spent two seasons as principal after Mack retired, then returned to his original chair). In his first decade with the Orchestra, he had three of his works performed: *Daredevil*, *Three Psalms for Jerusalem*, and *Motions for ‘Cellos*.

A former oboe student of Rathbun’s, I drove down to his Richfield home on a recent afternoon so we could discuss his music. I was greeted at the door by the crowing bark of Maris, his friendly Entlebucher Mountain Dog — named for the unseen character on *Frasier* — and led down to the composer’s basement studio.

This room, which he humorously calls his “man cave,” has a sliding glass door opening to his lush, green backyard. It features two desks — one strewn with reeds, cane, and other oboist paraphernalia, the other home to a computer flanked by a Yamaha electric piano keyboard, where he composes. There’s also evidence that Rathbun loves to golf — he pointed out a framed tournament bracket on the wall, from when he won a local match-play golf outing in 2016. He won again this year, and the day I visited he had spent midday on the course.

As Rathbun tells it, he approached Mark Williams, the Orchestra’s Chief Artistic Officer, a year and a half ago with an idea for a new work that would highlight the ensemble. “I proposed writing a 10-to-20-minute piece that would show off my orchestra colleagues — just something that I could contribute in my small way to the anniversary, which is so meaningful to all of us.”

The title *Pantheon* came from an unlikely source. “I happened to read a [review](#) of a biography of Hank Williams in *The Wall Street Journal* that mentions that he was in the ‘pantheon’ of country-western singers, and I thought, ‘that’s it!’ So I looked up ‘pantheon.’” In the Merriam-Webster Dictionary he found this fourth definition: ‘a group of illustrious or notable persons or things.’ Rathbun continued: “That’s us. We’re in the pantheon of great orchestras.”

Mark Williams liked the idea and Rathbun got started, beginning *Pantheon* in July 2017 and finishing it this past January. Its final form is just under 11 minutes, and based on perusing the score and listening to the MIDI audio, it’s an enjoyable overture-like romp with short, virtuosic solos, booming brass chords, and a mellifluous E-major retreat at its center.

The work begins in hushed tones with bass drum thumps and the double basses eeking out a short idea: F leaping up to B-flat, then two slithering half steps to A and then to

A-flat. This repeated bass line of leap and chromatic descent seems innocuous as it hits your ear, but this is the DNA of *Pantheon*. Most everything is built from these tentative notes, from the string flurries and the brass tattoos to the woodwind hockets and the percussion licks. The richly stentorian polychords — where two different harmonies are played together — change kaleidoscopically via these same smooth half steps. (*David Kulma demonstrates this technique [here](#).*)

This will sound familiar if you know Rathbun's music. You can hear his penchant for thick harmonies and his love of poignant major keys in his mournful *Threnody* for oboe and piano. His mercurial melodic lines built from chromatic slippage are the heart of his popular oboe duo showpiece *3 Diversions* (there are at least six college recital performances on [YouTube](#).) His love for molding new ideas out of old ones is central to his wind quintet *Phases*: the material from the fast [first movement](#) becomes the slow [fourth](#). And as a man full of affable, sly jokes that often lead to an unforgettable, buzz-lipped guffaw followed by fast chuckles, his deft humor is on display as the instruments angrily disagree in “Two Marches” from his *Suite for Oboe and English Horn*.

Rathbun also showed me a musical secret in *Pantheon*'s slow E-major center that features an elaborate solo for principal oboe Frank Rosenwein. He lifted from his music stand the oboist's equivalent of the Bible — the Barret Oboe Method — and turned to “Progressive Melody No. 15” on page 71. “This is kind of where I got the harmonic idea.” He borrowed a series of chords in the rarely-played accompanying bass line — measures 28 and 29 — to undergird his own tune. The trombones even play this alberti bass during the climactic spin through his melody. “I always tell my students to look at the bass line. Barret's melody is plain by itself, but when you add his harmony it becomes so poignant.”

After a completely different return to the opening ideas and a wickedly fast flute solo, *Pantheon* ends quietly. Rathbun acknowledges the B-flat major implied by the opening idea with ravishing, complex harmony, extra chordal swells passed around the orchestra, and a fragment from his Rosenwein melody “to see if anyone can catch the reference to the middle section as a final, little farewell.”

Summing up our extended conversation, Rathbun added, “I think it'll be an exciting piece to hear. We've got the Rolls Royce of orchestras to play it. It's intimidating to write for my colleagues, but I know they'll sound great. They'll do as they always do: as Mack would say, ‘bring home the bacon.’”

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