

The Cleveland Orchestra: Joshua Smith rediscovers Goethe via Pintscher

by Mike Telin



Last week, the conductor Matthias Pintscher led The Cleveland Orchestra in works by Rachmaninoff and Bartók. This week, music by the *composer* Matthias Pintscher will be featured when principal flute Joshua Smith gives the U.S. premiere of Pintscher's *Transir for flute and orchestra*.

The program, under the direction of Alain Altinoglu, will also include a Suite drawn by the conductor from Debussy's opera *Pelléas and Mélisande*, and Ravel's *Rapsodie espagnole*, *Pavane for a Dead Princess*, and *Boléro*.

The concerts take place on Thursday, November 8 at 7:30 pm, Friday the 9th at 11:00 am (no Pintscher), and Saturday the 10th at 8:00 pm.

Tickets are available [online](#).

Pintscher wrote the concerto for Emmanuel Pahud, principal flute of the Berlin Philharmonic, who described the piece as “the most avant-garde work I have played so far, in terms of all the special effects required and how to synchronize them with the orchestra.”

Although I have always enjoyed Pintscher's music, I was not prepared for what I heard when I sat down to listen to the nineteen-minute work. I was mesmerized and at a complete loss for words.

“It's hard to describe, and I don't think it's supposed to be described,” Joshua Smith said during a recent interview. “You're not supposed to know exactly what it's about. It's just supposed to strike some kind of weird chord in your body. That's how I feel

when I listen to it. And his use of extended techniques is not gratuitous. They're used for very specific reasons — to create color and atmosphere.”

Smith, who has been a featured soloist with the Orchestra in works by Bach, Mozart, Penderecki, and Jörg Widmann, said that he specifically chose the Pintscher because he has never been an extended-techniques player. “I thought, now's the time. I need to figure out how to do all of this. I knew the piece was in my library and I thought, I like his music, I've played a lot of it in the orchestra, and I want to have this challenge.”



Smith said that when he first listened to the concerto, he was riveted and immediately pulled into its sound world. Then he looked at the score. “I started turning pages and tried to figure out what he was doing and how he was doing it and I thought — I have no idea what any of this means, and I have no idea how I'm going to learn it.”

How *did* he begin to learn it? “Very slowly! It has been like learning a new language. It does have some aspects of flute playing that I'm used to doing, but those sections are few and far between. I appreciate the fact that learning it has been supremely frustrating sometimes, but it's also been freeing and adventurous.”

Once Smith learned how to physically produce the array of techniques, the next step was to instill them in his body. “Many times you're reaching for something you have

never reached for before and the fingering combinations don't feel natural. So you have to make a conscious choice not to do what you would normally do to sound clean, clear, focused, and beautiful. You have to be okay with experimenting and making mistakes.”

Transir is dedicated to and based on sketches by French spectral composer Dominique Troncin, who died of AIDS in 1994 at the age 33. Smith noted that the conclusion of the work is haunting. “At the end there are 33 respirations. I think the piece is loosely about the spiritual — like *Death and Transfiguration* — the philosophies that are wrapped up in letting go and moving beyond this world and into the next one.”

The process of learning the piece led Smith to revisit the writings of Goethe. “I decided to start reading *Faust*, and the first page of Part One, the dedication, is filled with the ideas of spirits.”

The first few lines are as follows:

*Uncertain shapes, visitors from the past
At whom I darkly gazed so long ago,
My heart's mad fleeting visions — now at last
Shall I embrace you, must I let you go?*

“The spirits are flying around and the shapes are not concrete, not in black and white. It's basically saying that I'm about to tell you this story and I don't know where it's going to go. When I read that first page I thought, that's exactly what I feel this piece is about. I asked Matthias, and he said, ‘You have good instincts, because I was inspired by Faust when I wrote it.’”

Smith said that when you listen to the concerto, simply picture yourself outside taking a walk, and maybe you'll hear a bird or the wind, but whatever you hear, it won't be wrong. “Imagine yourself sitting by a lake or being out at night with the dog and looking at the sky. And if you listen to what's going on around you, you can find ways to hear the wind rustling and water splashing. It's art that reflects a natural, beyond-human realm.”

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