

Paul Jacobs to play U.S. premiere of Deutsch organ concerto at Severance Hall

by Daniel Hathaway



Organist Paul Jacobs will return to Severance Hall this week to play four performances of Viennese composer Bernd Richard Deutsch's *Okeanos* with Franz Welser-Möst and The Cleveland Orchestra.

The concerts, which begin on Thursday evening, March 14 and run through Sunday afternoon, March 17, include Haydn's *Symphony No. 34* and Tchaikovsky's *Symphony No. 5*. This week's programs mark the first United States performances of Deutsch's organ concerto, which received its debut in November of 2015 by Wolfgang Kogert and Radio-Symphonie-orchester Wien in the Großer Saal of Vienna's Musikverein.

I caught up with Jacobs on his mobile phone during a break between auditions at the Juilliard School in New York to ask him for some of his impressions of Deutsch and *Okeanos*.

"I only knew Deutsch by name, but he has quite a successful career and reputation in Europe. It's my hope that his music becomes better known here in the United States. It's really excellent writing. We've spoken on the phone, and we're the same age, which is an interesting feature of the collaboration."

'Okeanos' refers to the Titan in Greek mythology who rules over a great river encircling the earth. In the composer's notes on his publisher's [web page](#), Deutsch writes that the title of his piece also relates "to an idea of immense (and sometimes unfathomable) greatness and breadth, which conjures up in my mind the thought of the organ."

The composer adds that he consciously wrote the solo part for a concert hall organ, wanting to avoid the instrument's inevitable religious associations. As a performer, Jacobs is impressed with the work. "It provides a really stunning example of a contemporary collaboration between the organ and orchestra, and new sound worlds for the listener," he said.



"The music itself is brilliantly written and evocative of the mythological god Okeanos carrying us into the deepest waters. We experience wave sounds, luminous textures rolling along, and really spectacular effects between the organ and orchestra. The conclusion is a *tour de force* that at moments is wonderfully terrifying for all concerned — organist, orchestra, and listener. The sonic proportions of this composition are massive and splendid. Deutsch's artistic purposes are very noble, and he achieves them. It's complex for the musicians, but it should be ravishingly beautiful and thrilling for the audience."

Jacobs is also impressed by Deutsch's technical facility in writing for the organ. "I think it's a masterfully crafted work," he said. "From the organist's perspective, he exploits the vast sonic and dynamic range of the instrument, and writes intelligently and insightfully for it. He must have consulted an organist because his writing is very comprehensive and sensible for the instrument, which can be intimidating for many composers, even seasoned ones."

Okeanos also features brilliant writing for the orchestra, both alone and in combination with the organ, Jacobs said. "Deutsch uses instruments in a traditional way but also achieves some unusual and innovative effects. In the third movement,

there are some spectacular dialogues between sustained chords in the organ using the highest and lowest pitches, while an English horn slithers along in between. We hear the organ in its traditional way with its *plenum* sound, but we also hear very evocative colors that should blend perfectly with the texture of the sound of the orchestra. I've had the score since early fall, and I've been chiseling away at the work ever since, just one bit at a time. I'm eager to unveil it."

Readers who would like to have a look at the score before hearing it in concert will be happy to know that Boosey & Hawkes makes *Okeanos* viewable on its [website](#) (free and easy registration required). Be sure to notice the lavish percussion section that Deutsch requires, and some performance notes for the players — including the special tuning of the double basses.

Paul Jacobs' appearances with The Cleveland Orchestra this week are the latest in a series of solo and concerto performances that have included organ works by Brahms, Copland's *Organ Symphony*, Stephen Paulus's *Grand Concerto for Organ and Orchestra*, and Liszt's *Fantasy and Fugue on the chorale 'Ad nos, ad saluterem undam.'* Earlier this season, he played the world premiere of John Harbison's *What Do We Make of Bach?* with Osmo Vänskä and the Minnesota Orchestra.

In addition to his stateside activities, Jacobs is also busy introducing American music for organ and orchestra to European audiences. Last season he performed Wayne Oquin's *Resilience* on tour with the Philadelphia Orchestra. He performed and recorded Samuel Barber's *Toccata Festiva* with the Lucerne Symphony earlier this season, and next season will bring the Paulus Concerto to Germany and Poland under the baton of Giancarlo Guerrero.

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