

Contemporary Youth Orchestra heads into its twenty-fifth year

by Mike Telin and Rory O'Donoghue



“There was no question that I was going to form this orchestra. My goal was simply to provide something new,” [Contemporary Youth Orchestra](#) founder Liza Grossman said during a recent interview. Grossman recalled that as a high school student at the Interlochen Arts Academy she was told she had two options for a career in music: play in an orchestra or teach in the schools. “I have a high respect for both of those professions, but I knew that I didn’t want to do either of them.”

Once she realized that her calling was to be a youth orchestra conductor, she knew she needed to figure out a way to let students know that there are far more options in music. It’s worked out well for Grossman, who said, “Leading CYO has grown into a life that

has been so rewarding, and all of the work is a pleasure. I think it was Mark Twain who said ‘The secret of success is making your vocation your vacation.’”

For the past 24 years, this orchestra has always been guided by Grossman and her team’s mission to expose its young musicians to as many facets of the music industry as possible, including the recording arts, writing and recording music for video games, or being a turntable artist. Part of this initiative involves bringing in artists of note, from pop stars like Jason Mraz to pillars of the classical music world like [Joan Tower](#). Last March, CYO dedicated an entire concert to Tower’s music in celebration of her 80th birthday, with the composer in attendance. This month Mraz performed with the orchestra in two sold-out concerts at Severance Hall. A quick look through [ClevelandClassical.com’s](#) archives documents this goal.

Since 2004, CYO has presented its signature Rock the Orchestra concerts, which involve more than just a famous musician dropping in from the sky, doing the concert and going away. They advance the cause of CYO, and this year’s featured artist, Grammy-winning singer-songwriter [Jason Mraz](#), proved to be a perfect choice.



Grossman was first introduced to Mraz last summer when she attended his concert at Jacobs Pavilion at Nautica. Not every artist from the pop or rock world would be a fit for this annual event. What was it about Mraz and his music that made Grossman think he

would make an ideal collaborator? “The orchestra members know his music, and Jason is very passionate about education, specifically arts education,” Grossman said, adding that “his songs have so many different styles: pop, rock, ballad. When I listened to his music it was easy for me to hear how an orchestra could be added. From the orchestral side, it was clear that it would be an easy fit. Jason has an incredible variety of things that he does with his voice. He can belt, sing rock and operatic, and has an amazing falsetto.”

On Friday afternoon June 7, I met Mraz prior to a rehearsal at Tri-C’s Metro Campus auditorium. We found a place in the top row of seats, and while I opened my computer, the inquisitive Mraz asked me how Cleveland’s classical music community felt about the Rock the Orchestra concerts. I told him that they love them and have always been very supportive.

“That’s great,” Mraz said, then asked, “Is it because it stimulates interest in orchestral music?” I told him that I think that it does, and today, classical means so much more than Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart. Now we have rock musicians such as Bryce Dressner who are writing classical music.”

The soft-spoken Mraz is very humble and not afraid to be critical of his own music, which I tell him has a symphonic quality to it. “Umm,” he said, “I have never thought about that. That’s why I was nervous coming into this — I’ve always thought that I painted in primary colors. I also have a bad habit as a writer — I often find myself playing the same intervals over and over again as I’m creating melodies or building chord patterns.”



I tell him that I find his music to be well-structured, and because he adds so many little nuances, it doesn’t feel stuck in those primary colors.

“Ah, yes,” he said, “I do that to keep it interesting for me. As a performer, I don’t ever want to get bored. I want the music to be familiar, but not too predictable. I do want it to resolve, and land in a place where the brain is hoping it would land, but I always want

the words and the story to be entertaining. It's fun on the tongue and the palate as I'm singing. So I try to make sure there's something feeding those little dopamine hits to the listener."

Mraz said that at first he wasn't sure how this project with CYO would play out. "I feel like I've been moving so fast that I tend not to look back, but because of how Liza and her team pulled out some songs from the past that they thought would make great symphony pieces, I'm getting a retrospective of my catalogue and it's given me a whole new outlook."



How has the experience of working with young musicians changed Mraz? "I'm not sure how just yet, but I know that it will," he said, "because I do know that I want to have this experience again. But I don't know what that will mean for new works, or how I might be involved in the arrangement process of my older ones."

By this point in our conversation CYO musicians are now everywhere in the auditorium. Mraz points to a group near us. "When you hang out with 115 disciplined young people who are learning and so talented, I just get inspired to go practice. And I know that is going to improve my musicianship."

I asked him why he decided to take on the CYO project. He said that he had wanted to do an orchestra project for a long time but wasn't sure how to go about creating one. "Because I didn't know where to start I was very intimidated," he said. "I had done one song with the Norwegian Radio Orchestra back in 2008, but I only got to run through it once in the sound check and sing it on the broadcast. Afterwards I thought, that was so thrilling and so beautiful, but I didn't know where to begin to do that again. I guess part of that is me wondering if there's any value to my music — you know, an artist dealing with his own self-worth. Could I really go to the San Diego Symphony and say 'Hey, let's do some of my songs?'"



When Mraz was introduced to Grossman last summer and she told him about CYO, he thought, "Oh my gosh, is this really going to be my chance? I know this is an opportunity for these guys. It's after school continuing education, and if my being here contributes to their continued growth, then I love that even more. Not only am I getting an opportunity, they're getting one too. And it's a youth orchestra and not just a group of jaded musicians who have played it all and now have to suffer through my music. I think all of us are learning and growing, and that makes me feel comfortable."

Ending our conversation just as the orchestra was tuning up, we agreed that people working together to create something amazing is what education is all about.

“The world *is* messed up, and that’s why we’ve got to be positive,” Mraz said to the audience during the Saturday night concert. With an overarching theme of optimism tying most of the evening’s songs together (as well as the bulk of his now six full studio albums), he made it very clear that he believes in the lightness of positive thinking.

“People ask me all the time, ‘Jason, how can you carry on writing love songs when people are still being elected who are preventing peace?’ and I say, ‘Love is Still the Answer,’” he said before a rendition of *Love is Still the Answer*.



The three-hour concert featured nineteen songs, each of which was expanded from their original three- or four-minute settings to include as many soloists as possible. It followed a clear, preconceived trajectory. In between several songs, Mraz led the audience through deep breathing exercises, which served as a nice palate cleanser between the music. Noting that *The Remedy* sounds a bit like “Jupiter” from Holst’s *The Planets*, Mraz acted out a little shtick of rallying the orchestra into a brief excerpt from Holst’s score, with Mraz on the podium. Although the rehearsed narrative transitions that moved one song into the next bordered on cheesiness, it was apparent that everyone was having fun.

Each number featured a soloist — or twelve — from the CYO, sometimes as a brief riff played standing from their chair, sometimes as an extended solo played from the front of the stage. During 5 / 6, a number of vocalists from the Tri-C Vocal Arts Academy joined Mraz down front. Taking the hand of a young boy, Liza Grossman proudly declared that “this is one of CYO’s grandstudents! I taught his mom, who’s in the balcony.”



Grossman ran a tight ship all evening, keeping the massive orchestra well on track and closely following Mraz. Soloists were clearly in their element, having fun going back and forth with Mraz. Overall, Stefan Podell’s arrangements worked well in an orchestral setting, and the musicians played with focus and enthusiasm.

Mraz went full operatic falsetto on *Mr. Curiosity*, belting with shocking volume and control to the delight of the audience. His voice was strong, flexible, and daring throughout the night, ringing brilliantly throughout Severance Hall. The singer worked the entire stage, weaving through musicians and joining the choir on the risers many times. As he made his way through the ensemble, he gave out cheery high-fives, which left the kids beaming.

Mraz was also quite enterprising with CYO’s fundraising goals. Before *93 Million Miles* he told the audience to remove the colored paper insert from their programs, with instructions on how to donate “Now, take your phones out,” he said, and the

audience chuckled. “No, no, not to donate right now — shine your phone’s flashlight through the colored paper during this next song, and wave it like a lighter. Then donate later.”



At one point, Grossman asked Mraz to introduce his wife, who was sitting in the balcony. The otherwise jovial temperament of Severance Hall tangibly shifted, as the audience whipped their heads around to catch a glimpse of the reason for Mraz’s unavailability.

Mraz shared his biggest hits with the audience — a cheeky *Make It Mine*, which he introduced saying “This gave me the Grammy!” *I’m Yours* featured an extended solo scat by Mraz, and he saved his new song, *Have It All*, for an encore.

Most importantly, the evening was fun, and Mraz was adamant about the transformative power of music education. “I love organizations like this — I came up in organizations like this.” He added that if he hadn’t been able to take advantage of programs like CYO, he wouldn’t be where he is in the music industry today.

While the two sold-out Jason Mraz concerts at Severance made the ideal vehicle to send CYO forward into its 25th year, the organization began laying the groundwork for the

future back in March of 2018. That month marked its relocation from its long-time home at Cleveland State University to Cuyahoga Community College, and allows the organization to work in collaboration with Tri-C's [Creative Arts Academy](#). The chorus for last year's Kenny Loggins concert and this year's concerts with Mraz came from Tri-C's Vocal Arts Academy.



Grossman explained that this move provides CYO with the means to offer young musicians more avenues of participation in their areas of interest. “CYO holds [auditions](#) each spring for the upcoming season. Those auditions are not only for the orchestra but also for our chamber music and master class program called [Origins](#).”

She explained that students who are accepted into Origins are assigned to smaller ensembles. Each ensemble has its own coach, who works closely with the students all year to help them improve both musically and technically.

“The great thing about this is that anyone who auditions for CYO is placed in an ensemble appropriate to their desires and their current level,” Grossman said. “Some may just want to have a chamber music experience while some may need more personal work with our faculty before they are ready to be part of the big orchestra. The great thing is that this now brings us to a point where we don't have to say no to anybody.

This is just one of the many incredible things that our relationship with Tri-C means for the organization.”

Photos by Robert Mueller.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com June 23, 2019.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)