

Digging into Kent Blossom with Mark Kosower

by Jarrett Hoffman



Cellist Mark Kosower and pianist Jee-Won Oh will find themselves in a familiar place on Wednesday, July 3 at 7:30 pm: in Ludwig Recital Hall at Kent State University, where they'll once again open the faculty concert series at this year's Kent Blossom Music Festival. And there's a reason for that — whether at Kent or

elsewhere, they always come up with a program that's worth talking about.

And that's exactly what Kosower and I did for about twenty minutes over the phone earlier this week. We discussed his and Oh's choices of works by Beethoven, Fauré, Bach, Chausson, and Schubert, with conversational side trips both poignant and silly.

Jarrett Hoffman: I'm excited to talk to you about this program.

Mark Kosower: There are a number of themes running through it. There's the French contingent and impressionism, with Chausson being a bridge composer between Romanticism and impressionism. Then you have the Germanic theme with Bach, Schubert, and of course Beethoven, who had a picture of Bach on his wall in at least 1 of his 39 Viennese apartments. He was always being evicted.

JH: Is that so?

MK: Oh yeah, because he was very untidy and unclean. And apparently he also drank white wine while he composed. Whatever works, you know. Max Reger had to have ten mugs of dark beer and ten sausages a day!

JH: Where do you learn these kinds of things — I'm guessing not in school?

MK: You read, and of course when you travel, you meet people — you have conversations with other musicians.



JH: Let's stay with the Germanic side of things — I want to start with the Schubert "Arpeggione" Sonata, which is played by many different instruments, though none of course is the original, the arpeggione.

MK: Yes, it's for an instrument that had been invented the year before but soon became extinct. And that's proof that Schubert was more than a composer who wrote some pretty melodies. He was a very serious and thoughtful composer who was always experimenting, like all the great composers did and continue to do today. I guess the arpeggione was very good at thirds, sixths, and octaves, but the piece can be rather jumpy on the cello — there are a lot of large intervals and technical challenges.

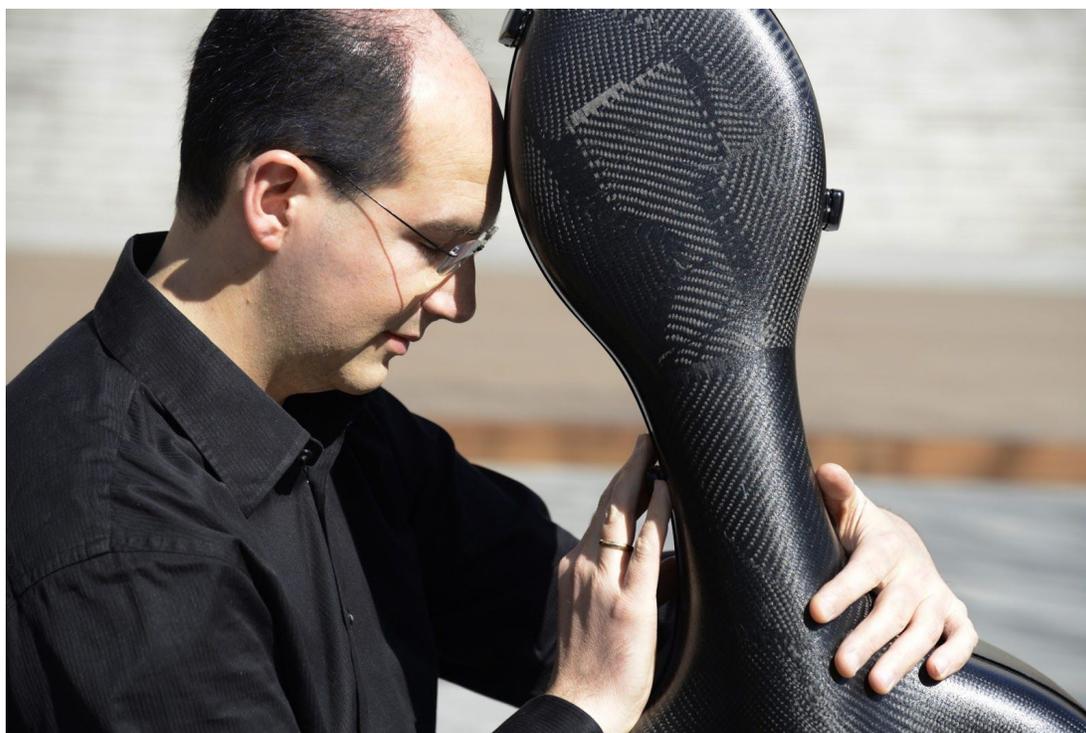
At the end of the day, I think what makes the piece special is not all of this, but that it's a *Lied* for an instrument and piano, which allows the musicians to express themselves from a very personal standpoint. And of course we can search Schubert's actual vocal *Lieder* to get a sense of the subject matter he was writing about.

JH: What would you say is the general subject here?

MK: We don't really know because there are no words, but of course Schubert always has that underlying sadness. The beautiful E-major second movement is so loving and glorious, but it's never truly happy. And if you look at something like *Die Winterreise*, it's always about unrequited love, relationships gone awry, and never being able to obtain a sense of whatever it is that's sacred to human existence.

JH: You mentioned the E-major second movement. Also the main melody of the piece comes back in major at the end, if I remember correctly.

MK: It does. We don't realize it when we're listening, but the second movement actually serves as a bridge to the last movement, which is in rondo form. And there *is* a lot of charm, playfulness, and wit in this piece. Some of the second themes are almost like comic opera. That underlying sadness is there, but for Schubert it actually ends relatively cheerfully, you could say.



JH: Let's jump over to the Bach Second Violin Sonata. You started your Bach for Humanity project last spring, bringing his music all around Cleveland, including to some unconventional venues. What's stood out to you so far?

ML: One of the most powerful experiences I've had was when I visited the East Cleveland Adult Activities Center. This is a place where adults who suffer from various conditions can come and do things together — there's all kinds of activities. I played short movements of various Bach pieces, and you could see the effect that music had on them over the course of 30 minutes — on people who not only aren't accustomed to coming to classical music presentations, but who have conditions where they can't sit still, or who have neurological problems that make it so their face is always moving. Slowly but surely, people got quieter and quieter. It just showed the power not only of music, but of this music, the music of Bach.

There must be a reason why his music has inspired others and been a source of strength and comfort for hundreds of years. And despite all of the drama and richness of it, there's an equilibrium about it too. People such as Albert Schweitzer and Pablo Casals would always play this music, and often first thing in the morning. It's a place to gravitate towards — something that has a spiritual meaning and provides an inner peace, an inner strength. I think that is one of the things that maybe separates Bach's music.

JH: Let's go to the French side of the program, then come back for the Beethoven.

MK: Historically, probably the most interesting thing about Fauré's Second Sonata is that the middle movement was originally composed as a commission from the French government. They asked Fauré to write something commemorating the hundredth anniversary of the death of Napoleon, and it's a funeral march — sort of the centerpiece of the Sonata.

As a cellist, it's even more interesting because early on in Fauré's career, he composed the famous *Élégie* for cello and piano. And this second movement of the Sonata is in the same key, and has exactly the same processional chords as the *Élégie* at the beginning.

Then simply as a musician, it's interesting to play this piece because it's a glimpse into the French version of extended tonality. Usually we're more focused on the Germanic version — Reger, Mahler. This piece has the typical things you expect from Fauré — the pleasantries, the beauty of the phrasing, the grace — but at the same time these fast-moving harmonies and passages that sound a little eccentric.

JH: How about the Chausson Pièce for Cello and Piano?

MK: There's some historical interest there too. He only wrote 39 opuses, and this is number 39. He had an untimely death — he rode a bicycle down a hill, crashed into a brick wall, and died at age 44. It seems to have been a freak accident — nobody has any reason to believe otherwise.

Chausson was a very conscientious composer. He worked slowly and I think struggled a lot, but was very individual and brilliant, and was highly regarded by Fauré and Debussy, who were at his funeral. Also Monet — anybody who was anybody in Paris was at his funeral. It's pretty amazing actually.

In a way this is a simple piece, but then it's simple in the French way — I mean, it starts out in 5/4. It's in C major, though as it progresses it also gets into the world of extended tonality — a little bit early too because it's from 1897. But it has a lot of charm and beauty — the things you expect from late Romanticism. And it's again a French look at things. Classical music tends to be a little dominated by the Germanic side.

JH: Speaking of which, let's talk about Beethoven's Seven Variations on "Bei Männern, welche Liebe fühlen." You and Jee-Won have programmed this — and his other variations on themes from The Magic Flute — fairly often. What do you enjoy about them?

MK: First of all, Beethoven is perhaps the master of variations — he takes a simple theme and brings in so much inventiveness, creativity, and imagination. I think their literary ties were a source of inspiration for that, and as a musician that makes them endlessly fascinating.

They're also challenging — I find that any piece where you're starting and stopping all the time is not the easiest thing in the world, especially for the cello. Down the road we'd like to do something with the Beethoven sonatas and variations, perhaps make a recording. We find the variations to be even more difficult than the sonatas — and if you look at recorded history, there are wonderful examples, but it's also clear they're not easy.

We do really enjoy these variations. They're a great way to start a recital, but they're versatile and you can put them in different places in a program.

JH: Well, I look forward to maybe someday hearing this CD.

MK: We'll keep working on the pieces (laughs).

Tickets for Wednesday's concert are available [here](#).

First and third photos by Lim Jong Jin.

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