

## Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra: conversations with Vinay Parameswaran and Annie Zhang

by Mike Telin



When you're the music director of a youth orchestra, one thing that goes with the territory is turnover in membership. "We had almost 50 students graduate last year," Vinay Parameswaran said during a telephone conversation. "But the new players are all very talented and the level of commitment is as strong as ever, so I'm excited about our opening concert."

On Friday, November 15 at 8:00 pm in Severance Hall, Parameswaran will lead the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra (COYO) in a program

featuring Sarah Kirkland Snider's *Something for the Dark*, Sibelius' *Symphony No. 2*, and Shostakovich's *Cello Concerto No. 1* with Annie Zhang as soloist. Tickets are available [online](#).

Parameswaran, who is now in his third season as COYO's music director, said that he first encountered Sarah Kirkland Snider's music on the recommendation of some of his colleagues. "*Something for the Dark* is a wonderfully powerful piece that I was attracted to from the beginning."

Written for the Detroit Symphony, the 12-minute piece explores a number of different moods. "It starts out heroic, and it has a flashback to childhood with some delicate moments. It ends with a dissonance, because there are no simple answers to life's big

questions. It was written at the height of Detroit's financial struggles, so I think she's saying that the comeback is not linear, it is a long process."

He noted that the musicians have enjoyed learning a piece that was only written a few years ago. "I'm able to communicate with the composer and relay her ideas to the players. That's been a fun part of the process because we can't call Sibelius and ask him what he meant here and there. Sarah's delightful. The moment I reached out to her, she got back to me and we talked for about an hour."

While Sibelius' *Symphony No. 2* is no small undertaking, Parameswaran felt that it would be a good piece to start the season. "It teaches you a lot about orchestration and ensemble playing. He also writes a lot of woodwind passages in the lower register, and the second voices are so important."

The conductor recalled encountering the Finnish composer's music for the first time. "I'm a timpanist, and the parts are very awkward and hard. I didn't understand the symphony at all. I talked to some Cleveland Orchestra members who said the first time you play his music you feel so stranded."

Part of the composer's quirkiness is that he writes in waves — a wave with this group of instruments and then with that group. "What I love about his music are the transitions — they are so beautifully constructed. The one from the third to the fourth movement is especially wonderful."

When asked about the Shostakovich concerto, Parameswaran said, "Annie sounds wonderful! Once she started rehearsing with us, all the players perked up just hearing how their parts fit in with hers. It's been fun for us to get to dig into an orchestral part that is so integral to the piece and has a lot of interplay with the solo line."



Born in San Jose, California, Annie Zhang is currently studying cello with Melissa Kraut in the Young Artist Program of the Cleveland Institute of Music. In the summer of 2019, Zhang attended Domaine Forget in Québec on the Enhanced Program Scholarship. This past October, she attended the Cello Akademie Rutesheim in Stuttgart, Germany, studying with Danjulo Ishizaka.

I caught up with the 17-year-old cellist by telephone and began by asking her why she chose to enter COYO's Concerto Competition with the

Shostakovich. “I like the 20th-century Russian composers,” she said. “My favorite music is anything by Prokofiev or Shostakovich. I like this concerto because it’s tense — like stifled madness — because of everything that he was going through at that time with the Stalin regime.”

Describing the concerto, Zhang said that it’s like a person telling a story, especially during the three sections of the second movement that lead into the famous cadenza.

“The third gets faster and heavier and this is the part where the government comes in. With the harmonics there’s a numbness — like everything is broken. That leads into the third movement where the orchestra goes away and the person is left alone. That person begins to move and everything begins to build momentum. It gets faster and more frantic, and when the orchestra comes in for the last movement, it’s like everyone is angry — that’s how I think about it.”

Zhang, who is in her second year as a member of COYO, said, “I like being able to do this with my colleagues. I was a little nervous at the first rehearsal.”

Although she was born in California, Zhang moved to Oregon at the age of two. “I pretty much spent my life in Portland” — that was until she moved to Cleveland. “I didn’t get serious about the cello until a couple of years ago,” she said. “There were a lot of other things that I liked to do. I liked theater and I wanted to be involved in school things, but then I realized that I wanted to go the music route.”

When Zhang was looking for a new teacher, some friends of her parents told them about Melissa Kraut and CIM. “My parents emailed Dr. Kraut and asked if I could have a trial lesson on Skype. She told us about the Young Artist Program and even though the auditions had already passed, she said I should come and visit and maybe do a late audition. I did, and I really liked her teaching.”

In addition to her studies at CIM, Zhang is also enrolled in an online school. “At first I wanted to go to public school because I thought I would miss it. I do miss regular high school things, but we realized that the schedule would be too hectic.”

But Zhang does have some of her family with her. “My mom came with me, and so did my two brothers. I felt really bad for them, but they are doing very well at Shaker, so it has turned out to be good for them.”

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