

Conductor Lorenzo Viotti to debut with The Cleveland Orchestra

by Mike Telin



Sometimes the best thing a young artist can do is to turn down a job offer, no matter how tempting it might be to say yes. “Early in my career I was invited to conduct some major orchestras,” Lorenzo Viotti said during a recent telephone interview from Lisbon, Portugal, where he serves as Music Director of the Gulbenkian Orchestra. “The most important thing I did was to say no to all of them. I had many things to learn before I stood in front of such great institutions, and I wasn’t ready to deal with the pressure.”

On Friday, November 29 at 8:00 pm at Severance Hall, [Lorenzo Viotti](#) will make his Cleveland Orchestra debut with a concert that includes Prokofiev’s Suite from *The Love for Three Oranges*, Rachmaninoff’s *Piano Concerto No. 4*, with Yuja Wang as soloist, Poulenc’s *Sinfonietta*, and Ravel’s *La Valse*. The program will be repeated on Saturday at 8:00 pm and Sunday at 3:00 pm. Tickets are available [online](#).

“I’m very excited to be making my Cleveland debut,” the 29-year-old said. “When I was a student in Vienna, Franz Welser-Möst would bring the Orchestra to the Musikverein almost every year and I was at every concert, so I’m feeling very lucky to be able to come.”

Viotti, who was recently appointed principal conductor of the Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra and the Dutch National Opera beginning in the 2021-2022 season, said that it took a long time to decide on this week’s repertoire. “That’s another thing — I’m very picky.”

Before he began discussing program possibilities, the conductor said it was important to know what the Orchestra had played during the past few seasons. “It is also Thanksgiving

weekend. I thought, that's a very festive time, and the audience probably doesn't want to hear Tchaikovsky 6."

From the start, Viotti did know that he would be collaborating with the excellent pianist Yuja Wang. "I love to work with Yuja." He added that Rachmaninoff's Fourth Concerto has a lot of jazz influences inspired by the time the composer spent in the States — he was present at the premiere of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, and was an enthusiast of Paul Whiteman's jazz orchestra.

"I thought, we are in America, and this is probably the best country for this style. And Yuja has an amazing ability to be flexible, which the concerto requires. But building a program around any of Rachmaninoff's piano concertos is not an easy task because it could easily become too heavy."

To avoid that problem, Viotti said he began to look at lighter works that had the same "sound culture," and thought that Prokofiev's Suite from *The Love for Three Oranges* fit the bill. "People know it, it's not that long, and it has so many different colors. So we have two Russian pieces that are completely different, and I think it's interesting to pair them together."

The conductor also wanted his program to pay homage to Cleveland's long association with Pierre Boulez. He discovered that Poulenc's *Sinfonietta* was performed by the Orchestra around 60 years ago and never again.

"I think Poulenc is an underestimated composer, even in France. The *Sinfonietta* has a lot of joy along with a French lightness that's almost a caricature of the composer. At the same time, it is extremely difficult — you need to have an extraordinary orchestra that can play very light and like chamber music. I know that because of Boulez, Cleveland has this strong French tradition so I thought, I'd like to go into that."

Rounding out the program will be Ravel's *La Valse*, one of Viotti's favorite pieces. "I played it with the Vienna Philharmonic," he said, "and the Viennese tradition with French repertoire is very specific. *La Valse* is not a glorious piece — people shouldn't do a standing ovation after the last note. It's actually a shock." Viotti sees the piece as a warning from Ravel. "He's telling us that what's happening in the world at the moment is a complete lie. Of course, the waltz at that time was the main dance in Europe — where everything is beautiful, with a lot of gold in those palaces — but under it there's a lot of blood."

Note to all: if you're looking for a thread that ties these four works together, don't. "Sometimes there is not a real connection between the pieces," Viotti said. "You could

say that playing the Prokofiev is going to help the Poulenc, and the Rachmaninoff with all its polyrhythmic moments will help the Ravel.”

Born in Lausanne, Lorenzo Viotti studied piano, singing, and percussion in Lyon. He studied orchestral conducting with Georg Mark in Vienna, where he also performed as a percussionist, including with the Vienna Philharmonic.

Viotti said that his time spent in the percussion section has served him well on his path to becoming a conductor. “As a percussionist you have a lot of time to wait and analyze what’s happening around you.” He added that learning to conduct a beat pattern is something that can be accomplished in three minutes, “but if you don’t have a natural rhythm inside you, a natural groove, then your life is going to be very complicated.”

He recalled attending a master class as a teenager with a drummer who performed with Prince. “He had only one snare, but he taught us what ‘groove’ means. He just played slowly and it was grooving so much. I thought, this is it — how can you conduct a Mozart or Haydn symphony if you don’t know how to groove in 4/4?”

When listening to Viotti talk, it is clear that he is a passionate student of his craft. “I was a drummer and I still love to play drums. Then I studied piano because I wanted to read scores. I started singing, because I thought that if I wanted to conduct opera, I needed to know how the voice works. And, unfortunately for my neighbors, I studied viola for six months just to understand bowings and get the feeling of the stringed instruments. From singing in chorus, to work in the archives of the Vienna Opera, everything has been about conducting. And I continue to study because I just want to know more.”

A passionate student, yes, but perhaps it’s also in his blood — he is the son of celebrated conductor [Marcello Viotti](#). “I lost my dad when I was fourteen years old. But I’m lucky because he was an extraordinary dad, and that was more important to me than to have a dad who was a famous conductor. Of course, on one side I would love to speak to him about so many things, but on the other side, it gave me freedom not having this big shadow behind me — we know the stories about sons being in the shadows of their dads. I’m always very happy to hear musicians tell me stories about my dad because he was such a beloved conductor. Everyone loved him.”

Lorenzo Viotti is a product of his generation, from his clothes to how he sees the role of a modern conductor. “I am what I am,” he said. “If you don’t like me, you don’t like me, but don’t *not* like me because I wear jeans, t-shirts, and sneakers. In the end it’s about the quality of the concert.”

He said that it is important for audiences to see young conductors on the podium. “Today conductors are more than just the ones who make beautiful music. We are the bridge to the audience. I don’t perform — I give my energy to the orchestra, and *they* play for the audience.”

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