

Cleveland Orchestra: a conversation with violinist Leila Josefowicz

by Mike Telin



Over the past ten years the adventurous violinist Leila Josefowicz and The Cleveland Orchestra have treated Northeast Ohio audiences to captivating performances of contemporary masterpieces. 2010 saw Thomas Adès' *Violin Concerto*, which was followed by John Adams' *Violin Concerto* (2011), Thomas Adès' *Concentric Paths* (2016),

and Adams' *Scheherazade.2* (2018).

On Thursday, February 8 at 7:30 pm, Josefowicz will return to Severance Hall to join conductor Susanna Mälkki in paying tribute to their mentor and friend Oliver Knussen with a performance of the late composer/conductor's *Violin Concerto*. The concert will also include Sibelius' *En Saga* and *Symphony No. 1*. The program will be repeated on Saturday, February 8 at 8:00 pm. Tickets are available [online](#).

During a recent telephone conversation with [Leila Josefowicz](#), I suggested that the combination of soloist, conductor, and orchestra this weekend feels like a dream team. "I agree," the violinist quickly said. "I wish every date was like this. The Orchestra is unlike any other and Susanna is spectacular. She's been a dear friend for many years, and our tastes align completely with newer music and what we're trying to achieve."

When asked why the artistic partnership with Mälkki clicks, the violinist attributed it to a shared work ethic, a devotion to their craft, and above all, a mutual respect for one another. "We just know each other extremely well. The beauty is that when we collaborate, the tiniest little gesture or movement is understood by the other. That's such a special thing that can never be taken for granted. There are so many great collaborations in the world. Some of them happen spontaneously, and that can be rewarding and

inspiring in an unexpected way, but there are also the great collaborations that come from shared experiences, shared ethics and history, and that's what Susanna and I have. This is something that I also had with Olly (Knussen), and shared with him for many, many years."

Josefowicz recalled the first time she met Knussen. "It's an amusing story," she said. "I was 20, and I'm 42 now, so that's how long ago? We were at a dinner, and let's just say that I'm not a very good self-promoter — I don't talk about what I do or about my achievements. We started off with 'Hi, so what do you do?' 'I play the violin.' Then other conversations happened. Then, 'How long have you played the violin?' 'A lot of years.' 'Oh.' It went on like that until by the end he said 'I know you.' It was a very sweet, funny moment that we talked about for years."

Josefowicz said that at the time of the dinner Knussen was writing his violin concerto for Pinchas Zuckerman. "After that meeting I signed on to learn it, and Olly and I ended up playing it all over the world for the next 15 to 20 years. I performed it 30 times with him, but I've also played it many times with Esa-Pekka (Salonen), Susanna, and other conductors, so I would say I've played it at least 50 times. It's a piece that is in my bones."



When asked about Knussen's 17-minute, three-movement work, the violinist described it as "challenging" in terms of coordinating the musical gestures. She added that it also has a level of suspense and drama that is "unmatched" in other concertos for the instrument.

Josefowicz said the first movement (Recitative), is full of that suspense — like an acrobat on a tightrope. "There are places that are almost like speech that I try to make very clear. There are also huge outbursts of emotion going on." She said the second movement (Aria) is tender and nostalgic, and a prime example of how lyrical Knussen's music can be. The third movement (Gigue), inspired by a clown fiddle player, is both scary and humorous. She pointed out that the thread that brings everything together is a high E harmonic. "It starts and ends the piece, as well as joining the second and third movements."

Each of the three movements is roughly five-minutes in length. "Olly was not a fan of having things go on too long — he never could sit through an entire opera — so everything is condensed and finely tuned. Every single shading, marking, and note is so meticulous. It's a cliché, but the piece is like a Fabergé egg, it's just polished and polished. There was such care involved with everything that he did."

I asked Josefowicz how she would fill in the blank: Oliver Knussen was _____.
"Astounding. He was astounding in presence, physical and mental. He was a gigantic person, like 6'4" or 6'5" and very large. He had an imposing look, but his personality was so witty. He could be hysterically funny. He had as many variables as his music. He was magical, and one of the most empathetic people that I have ever known, and I miss him every day. He absolutely transformed my entire existence as a musician and as a person."

Photos: Josefowicz with The Cleveland Orchestra by Roger Mastroianni; Knussen and Josefowicz by Rikimaru Hotta.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com February 5, 2020.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)