

## Father's Day with ChamberFest: Alexi Kenney and Ferdinand the Bull

by Jarrett Hoffman



This Father's Day, skip the awkward conversations with dad and instead sit down with him to enjoy an hour of music together, courtesy of ChamberFest Cleveland.

On Sunday, June 20 at 3:00 pm, six musicians and one narrator will gather at The Grove Amphitheatre to share a family-friendly program highlighted by Alain Ridout's

*Ferdinand the Bull* and Jean-Philippe Rameau's *La Poule* ("The Hen"). The selections also include music by Richard Strauss, Antonín Dvořák, Helen Grime, and Franz Schubert. Reserve a free ticket [here](#).

The Ridout piece, for solo violin and narrator, is a musical retelling of Munro Leaf's classic children's book *The Story of Ferdinand*. That heart-warming and humorous tale centers around a bull who stays true to himself — he enjoys smelling the flowers and having a bit of peace and quiet, even when he somehow ends up in the middle of a bullring.

Translated into more than 60 languages since its publication in 1936, the book has been read in households all over the world, including that of at least one ChamberFest musician when he was a kid. "My parents would read it to me when I was little," violinist Alexi Kenney said in a recent interview. "It was one of my favorite children's books."

Kenney said he's always on the lookout for new and unusual repertoire, and when he discovered this piece, it came with the added bonus of being perfect to perform in schools, something he loves to do.

Usually he takes up both the oratorical and performing duties. "It's really fun — it requires a bit of mental and physical gymnastics to speak while you're playing," he said. But on this occasion, Liza Grossman will play the role of narrator. "I heard she's wonderful, and it'll be great to make it something collaborative."

One of the most appealing aspects of Ridout's music paired with Leaf's story is how they work "on many different levels and for different kinds of people," Kenney said. "Of course it's a children's story at its heart, but the music is so cleverly done." He noted that it's almost as if Ridout followed in the vein of Wagner. "There's a motive for each character — Ferdinand, the matador, the mother. It's engaging and fun, but it works as a serious piece of music as well."

Particularly enjoyable for Kenney is the motive for Ferdinand's mother, which requires the violinist to imitate a cow. And how exactly do you do that?

"Careful bovine study," he quipped. "No — it's notated as a double-stop with a slide down, and if you use the bow and do the slide in just such a way, it sounds like a moo."

To match the story's setting of Spain, in general Ridout brings a Spanish flavor to the music. "I think he had works by Sarasate in mind when he was writing this," Kenney said. "It's very virtuosic for the violin in a particular way that you find in music by Sarasate and other virtuosic Spanish composers. There are particular techniques that will instantly evoke Spain."

As beloved as *The Story of Ferdinand* is, it faced some controversy in its early years. It was banned in Spain until the death of dictator Francisco Franco. And in Nazi Germany, Hitler called it "degenerate democratic propaganda" and ordered it to be burned. Even *The Plain Dealer* suggested that the book was corrupting America's youth.

The subtext around the story and its stereotype-eschewing main character is of course subjective. "I guess I see it as a tale of queer acceptance, maybe," Kenney said. "Obviously it can work on many levels, but it's funny to me that people were so up in arms about such a cute story."

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