

The Cleveland Orchestra Returns to Blossom Music Center

by Mike Telin



After a year's absence, The Cleveland Orchestra will return to the stage of Blossom Music on Saturday, July 3 and Sunday, July 4 at 8:00 pm. Under the direction of Brett Mitchell, the concerts will also mark the first time the full orchestra has performed in front of an in-person audience since March of 2020.

“The program is titled ‘An American Celebration,’ and while I’m certain there have been countless Fourth of July concerts over the decades with the same

name, for me, this program feels truly American,” Mitchell said during a telephone conversation. “We’re certainly not going to ignore the holiday, so there will be the pieces that are associated with it — the *1812 Overture* and *Stars and Stripes Forever* — but there was a desire to have the program be reflective of times that we are living in and that we have lived through since the Orchestra and audiences were last together.”

The playlist will also include Leonard Bernstein’s “Overture” to *Candide*, Mary D. Watkins’ *Soul of Remembrance*, Florence Price’s *Concerto in One Movement* with pianist Michelle Cann, Adolphus Hailstork’s *An American Fanfare*, and Aaron Copland’s “Suite” from *Appalachian Spring*. Tickets are available [online](#).

Mitchell, who served on the Orchestra’s conducting staff from 2013 to 2017, noted that the evenings will open with Bernstein’s celebratory Overture. “We didn’t want a concert full of *sis-boom-bah* American



repertoire, we wanted to acknowledge where we are and where we have been. And part of where we have been — as if anybody needs to be reminded why the Orchestra has not been able to perform for live audiences for sixteen months — is that we’ve all lived through a very difficult time. But that’s not entirely true because half a million of us did not survive the pandemic. So after the *Candide* we’ll play this gorgeous, heartbreaking piece, Mary D. Watkins’ *Soul of Remembrance*.”

The conductor said that he was introduced to the Watkins piece by a member of the Colorado Symphony. “Miss Watkins is a Denver-based African American composer, and when my friend played it for me I thought ‘my, this is beautiful.’” Mitchell described the piece as quiet and in places meditative. “She has a wonderful voice and a wonderful gift for immediate expression. I was only introduced to her music a couple of months ago and I can’t wait to dive into more of it. She seems to have a real knack for being able to communicate directly with the listener. There’s nothing opaque about it.”



Florence Price’s *Concerto in One Movement* will feature pianist Michelle Cann, a graduate of both the Cleveland and Curtis Institutes of Music, and who now teaches at Curtis. “The piece is only eighteen minutes long but there’s so much wonderful material it feels like a Brahms concerto,” Mitchell said. “The music is just glorious and my great hope is that it will find its way into the permanent piano concerto repertoire. And it should because it is a sensational piece of music. I can guarantee that people are going to love it.” Click [here](#) to read Jarrett Hoffman’s interview with Michelle Cann.

Having had the opportunity to speak to Brett Mitchell on numerous occasions during his time in Cleveland, one thing that always struck me was his unabashed enthusiasm for newly-composed and long-neglected works. “I was a composer before I was a conductor, so I know what it’s like to write a piece and then hope that someone will play it,” he said. “I became a conductor to be the composer’s advocate and Mary D. Watkins and Florence Price deserve to be heard. If I can do anything to help introduce this great music to new ears, that’s the most fulfilling thing I can do.”

Published on ClevelandClassical.com June 28, 2021.

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