

## Jahja Ling returns to the Blossom Stage

by Mike Telin



When Jahja Ling returns to the Blossom Music Center podium on Sunday, August 22 at 7:00 pm, the concert will mark the continuation of a relationship between Ling and The Cleveland Orchestra which began in 1984.

“My first concert was at Severance in January of ‘85 and my first Blossom

concert was in July of ‘85,” Ling said during a recent telephone conversation. “Aside from last year, which was cancelled due to the pandemic, if you count from ‘85 until now, this is the 36th consecutive season. I think it is a record.”

The all-Brahms program will feature the Violin Concerto with Sayaka Shoji as soloist and *Symphony No. 3*. Tickets are available [online](#).

The past year and a half has been difficult for many people, including the 69-year-old conductor. “I got COVID,” he said. “It was last July, so over a year ago. I was taken to L.A. because my son works at Cedars-Sinai, and was hospitalized for five days. I received very good treatment and have had no issues after that, thank God.”

Ling’s experience with COVID played an important part in his programming choices for Sunday’s concert. “Last year I was asked to conduct Brahms 2, and when they asked me back this summer, they asked if I still wanted Brahms. I said yes, but can I change it to the Third?”

He specifically wanted to program the Third Symphony because of its quiet ending. “It ends with a chorale, which is like a worship to God. And because of COVID, it’s a remembrance for the people who have passed from it. I want to remember those people and myself. Mine was not as severe as many, but it was quite serious, so for me, the chorale is a thanksgiving hymn. One of the things I am so thankful for is that I can still perform with my most beloved orchestra. We understand each other — and that makes me so grateful to be alive.”

Of the composer’s four symphonies, Ling said that he has always felt closest to the Third. “I know the First has an amazing ending, and the Second is full of sunshine. And the Fourth is the most mature with the passacaglia at the end. But there is something about the Third that is so sublime — every melody is unbelievable. Still, a lot of people don’t perform it because it ends quietly.”

In general, Ling finds that the music of Brahms speaks to him. “He’s a classicist, but he’s also a romanticist — but in a different way than Bruckner or Wagner.” Ling is especially fond of the Violin Concerto. “I’ve conducted it with many great soloists, and I always get goosebumps,” he said.

“The opening alone is in such a different world, and when the violin enters after the cadenza, it’s absolutely heavenly. And then the opening of the second movement is just amazing with the winds and the oboe solo — and the Cleveland winds can play it so sublimely.”



Sunday’s concert also marks the first collaboration between Ling and Sayaka Shoji. “I am always happy to bring young people to Cleveland, so when I heard about her I was

thrilled — everybody is so astonished with her playing. I am so looking forward to working with her.”

Winding down our conversation I mentioned that we were talking on the anniversary of the death of George Szell. “That was the same year I came to the U.S. for the first time,” he recalled.

“When I was growing up in Jakarta, Indonesia, I listened to The Cleveland Orchestra’s Szell recordings. Then when I went to Juilliard, the first thing my teacher played in theory class was the scherzo from Schumann’s Second Symphony. I could not believe it was humanly possible for an orchestra to play so perfectly. So I asked, ‘Who is that?’ and the teacher said, ‘That’s the Cleveland Orchestra with George Szell.’ At that time I did not even dream that one day I would conduct that orchestra for 36 years.”

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