

## The Cleveland Orchestra: a chat with Gustavo Gimeno

by Mike Telin



When [Gustavo Gimeno](#) was appointed principal percussion of Amsterdam's Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, he quickly began doing something that he had wanted to do for some time — study conducting. The Spainard soon came under the tutelage of Mariss Jansons and Claudio Abbado, and beginning with the 2015-16 season he became chief conductor of the Luxembourg Philharmonic Orchestra.

On Friday, November 26 at 7:30 pm and Saturday at 8:00 pm, Gimeno will return to the podium in Mandel Hall at Severance to lead The Cleveland Orchestra in a program titled “French Perspectives.” The concerts will feature Ravel's *Suite from Ma Mère l'Oye* (“Mother Goose”), Bryce Dessner's *Concerto for Two Pianos* with Katia Labèque and Marielle Labèque, and Franck's *Symphony in d*. Tickets are available [online](#).

I reached the friendly maestro — always a great conversationalist — by phone in Toronto where he serves as Music Director of the Toronto Symphony.

*Mike Telin: We're looking forward to having you back in Cleveland. How many times will this be?*

Gustavo Gimeno: I think it's the fourth. I've been two times at Blossom and then with the subscription series a couple of years ago.

I'm looking forward to it. I always tell everyone how much I love this orchestra because there's a sound that you don't find anywhere else. There are many good orchestras with beautiful sounds but this one only exists in Cleveland. I tell the musicians that you're with this sound all of the time, but we conductors travel every week. The very first

moments with Cleveland are very special. And the musicians are so professional. It's a paradise.

*MT: Is this your first time conducting Bryce Dessner's Concerto?*

GG: It is the first time, but I know Katia and Marielle Labèque very well. We've known each other since way back. We played chamber music together many years ago, and they have been soloists with orchestras I have conducted. But they have been talking about this piece for so long. They keep saying 'you should meet Dessner, the concerto is great, it's wonderful music, here's his telephone number.'

I've never met him but we have been communicating through texts. It's an exciting piece and very complete. There are all kinds of moments — it's subtle, so colorful, and also very powerful with rhythmic drive. I think it's very engaging.

I read somewhere that Katia said that it's "just music." It's difficult to define. It's simply nice, accessible music. Sometimes we want to label music so we can understand it, but this is difficult to label because it's several things at the same time.

*MT: Also on the program is Ravel's Mother Goose Suite — what a lovely piece.*

GG: It's a well-known part of the repertoire. But this is so fragile and delicate. There are parts of the Dessner that are also very delicate and refined, but with *Ma Mère l'Oye* that's basically the texture of the whole composition. It's a huge contrast with the Concerto, which comes right after it on the program.

*MT: I think this is a perfect Thanksgiving weekend program.*

GG: I think so too. But the Franck Symphony — I know that it hasn't been programmed in Cleveland for a while. Do you happen to know when it was last performed and who conducted it?

*MT: [I check our database.] The only performance I can find was with Marek Janowski in October of 2013.*

GG: Yes, so eight years ago, but the point is who knows when it was played before that, and that's something that gets my attention.

I love this composition. I realize that when you look back at its history it was part of the repertoire, but somehow I get the feeling that it is falling off the repertoire, or it's in the

shadow of the Brahms symphonies, which is in a way unfair. It's a great composition and it suits the sound of The Cleveland Orchestra very much.

As someone who had studied the score in detail, as we conductors have to do, I realize that there are also moments where the transparency is very important in order to get some voices to be audible, so it does require a certain amount of work. It's not like you can play it and by nature it just happens. Some moments require you to get inside the texture. I look forward to the rehearsals — to go through the process with the musicians.

*MT: You recently recorded the piece with your orchestra in Luxembourg.*

GG: I must tell you that I am proud of the recording. I think we did a good job because when I hear it I think, 'Yeah, that's what I feel.'

As a conductor you can have your ideas, but when you hear that the performance or recording is close to what you intended, it is a nice feeling. And that does not always happen.

Sometimes when you listen to old concerts or recordings you realize that you have changed your mind, or you're not happy about this or that, but in this case I still believe in what is in there.

*MT: You're also the Music Director of the Toronto Symphony.*

GG: Where I am right now, and it's great to be here. I love the Toronto Symphony — it was love at first sight, at least for me. It's a vibrant city with wonderful musicians and I am very happy to spend many weeks here.

*MT: You started your musical career as a percussionist, do you have any desire to return to the section?*

GG: Not at all. For me percussion was a way of making music with others and to do it at the highest level, because I played in a great orchestra.

I learned a lot about how things work onstage and offstage whether it's planning, making decisions, or how musicians feel and think. I experienced that and it was a wonderful experience, but at a certain point my mind and my soul went down a different path. Therefore I can't imagine going back.

Being a conductor is a lot of work and when we finish this conversation I will open the score to the Franck — that's how it goes.

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