

Pianist Imogen Cooper returns to Severance

by Mike Telin



It's difficult to believe that it was in April of 2014 that the inimitable British pianist Imogen Cooper last appeared with The Cleveland Orchestra. Interestingly, it was Dame Jane Glover who was on the podium for that engagement.

On Thursday, March 24 at 7:30 pm, Cooper and Glover will reunite with the Orchestra on the Severance Music Center stage.

The program will include music by Britten, Mozart, Tallis, and Vaughan Williams. Performances continue through Sunday and tickets are available [online](#).

From the beginning of our recent telephone conversation, it was clear that Cooper is excited to be back in Cleveland. "It's lovely to be here. The sun is shining and I can't wait to renew my relationship with the orchestra. It's going to be a real joy," the pianist said from her hotel room. "And that gorgeous hall that I love so much. I don't think there's a more beautiful hall in the world."

Speaking of renewing that musical friendship, Mozart's 22nd Concerto provides the perfect opportunity for her to do just that. "I think it's unique in its orchestral material, and that glorious sound with the clarinets in the woodwind mix. It's a work like no other in that it's just got more of everything. More melodies, more ideas, more humor, more suffering, and it's all pouring out of that beautiful creative mind of his."

The pianist pointed out that it is also the only Mozart piano concerto where, in the second movement, the orchestra has more music than the soloist. "That's largely because

there are two beautiful woodwind serenades where the piano has no part at all. I just get to sit there and listen, which I'm happy to do."

I noted that the Rondo itself is full of surprises that keep coming right up to the end. "Are we going to give a spoiler and say what happens halfway through the movement?" she said. I told her that every time the place we are not mentioning comes around, I'm always caught off guard. "That moment still catches me by surprise too. We can't say any more, people will just have to listen. But whatever it is that we're not talking about only happens in one other concerto."

I asked Cooper why she loves Mozart's music so much. "How long have we got," she said. After taking a second to think, she said that it's perfect.

"There's never a note out of place or that hasn't got meaning. And the genius mind of the person who has put that note at that very spot — that very place that makes a given phrase magical. And he always comes back with something new, something fresh. And like some of the other great composers, he makes your heart stop. And despite having said that, his music is actually life-enhancing. You just feel better when you've been plunged into Mozart. It gives you faith in the world again. And we rather need that at the moment."

As always, Cooper looks forward to working with Jane Glover (*right*), with whom she has shared a stage on numerous occasions. "It's not that many considering that we've actually been friends for 40 years," she said. "And in the past decade I've probably worked with her more on this side of the pond. But it's always been an extremely happy and easy collaboration. You know, they say that friendship doesn't always matter when you're making music, but sometimes it can help and be a real inspiration."

The two artists share more than a great friendship — they are both recent recipients of the Commander of the Order of the British Empire for their contributions to the musical life of the nation.



Their appearance in Cleveland as Dame Jane Glover and Dame Imogen Cooper will be a first for them. "We haven't been on the platform together because it was actually very recent for both of us," Cooper said. "I was awarded the medal in 2019, but of course I

couldn't meet the Queen in 2020, for obvious reasons. I actually met up with her back in October which was wonderful. I had a twenty-minute, one-to-one audience with her and she was lovely.”

Cooper admitted to being very nervous about meeting the Queen. “I didn’t sleep for a couple of nights before, but she’s so gracious and made everything so easy. We had quite a laugh actually. It’s very nice to have higher-ups come to you and say, ‘We like what you do.’ So I feel enormously privileged — it’s been a wonderful thing to happen.”

Winding down our conversation, the topic turned to the lockdown which she said initially forced her to take an overdue sabbatical. “We were lucky to have the most beautiful spring I can remember. But having said that, this was on the back of truly terrible events. And of course, I did lose all my work like everybody else, and after a while it started getting a little bit tougher. I was lucky that when it was possible to have any streaming or a socially distanced audience, I had work straight away.”

Cooper said she is fortunate that her concerts that were postponed in 2020 were moved into the 2021-22 season — “with a gentle request that if I could keep to the same repertoire, the promoters would be grateful. Which means that I’m carrying double the load of repertoire. But I was so grateful when promoters came back and made the effort to hang on. You really take your hat off to them.”

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