

The Cleveland Orchestra: an MLK Celebration in June

by Jarrett Hoffman



A surge of coronavirus in January forced The Cleveland Orchestra to postpone its annual Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration Concert. Traditionally held around the time of MLK Day, this year the concert will take place not long from Juneteenth.

The Orchestra will honor Dr. King on Saturday, June 4 at 7:00 pm at Mandel Concert Hall with a program of music by several Black composers — Dolores White, Mary D. Watkins, Carlos Simon, Brian Raphael Nabors, William Grant Still, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, and John Rosamond Johnson — as well as music in the African American spiritual tradition.

Vinay Parameswaran will lead the Orchestra, William Henry Caldwell will lead the Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration Chorus, and soprano Jacqueline Echols and narrator Tony Sias will be featured as soloists.

The concert typically sells out far in advance, but perhaps because of the rescheduling, you have the rare opportunity to still get free [tickets](#). That link also provides program details and information about livestreams and live broadcasts.

I had the pleasure of speaking with Vinay Parameswaran by phone in early January to talk about several of the pieces on this year's program — particularly the works by living composers — and why this concert means so much to him every year.

Jarrett Hoffman: Let's start with the newest piece on the program, Carlos Simon's Fate Now Conquers from 2020. I read in his notes that it was influenced by Beethoven — it follows the harmonic structure of his Seventh Symphony, second movement.

Vinay Parameswaran: There's definitely a connection there, but what I love about this piece is that it's very much Simon's original language. He takes elements of Beethoven and incorporates them into his own unique way of writing for orchestra. I also like that there's struggle in it — there's conflict and tension. And even though it's not very long, I think the journey of it is really compelling.

JH: Another short piece with a unique language is Brian Nabors' Iubiolo.

VP: He's an exciting young composer — I'm really interested in a lot of his work. His music has been played quite a bit, but I think it's exciting for us to present a composer who's still growing in reputation. I have a feeling that his music is going to be played a lot by Cleveland and other major orchestras.

JH: I saw on his website that he's booked up for commissions through the beginning of 2023.

VP: I saw that too — good for him!

JH: There's one piece that's not particularly recent but that doesn't seem to have ever been recorded — although it's been performed by big-name orchestras like Detroit and Dallas. And that's Celebration by Dolores White, who is of course a Clevelander.

VP: I think The Cleveland Orchestra has a special connection with Dolores White because her husband [the late Donald White] was in the Orchestra. So you could say she's part of the family.

This piece is a great way for us to open our program in a celebratory mood. The audience will hear a lot of energy coming from the orchestra — they'll get that immediately, and that continues throughout the entire piece. So I'm excited for us to play this, and I can't wait for the audience to hear it as well.



JH: I know that last year at Blossom, the Orchestra played Mary D. Watkins' Soul of Remembrance. It's a beautiful piece, but she's not very well-known.

VP: She's not, and I think this is a piece that has been unfairly ignored. I'm glad that we played it at Blossom — Brett [Mitchell] conducted it, and it's the perfect fit for this program. We have so much energetic music with the Nabors, the White, the Simon. This piece is so beautifully written and orchestrated, and so moving. I think it'll provide time to reflect. And obviously on this program, where we're reflecting on history and thinking about the future, it's perfect.

JH: In terms of reflecting, I know that you've conducted this concert a couple of times now. I'm curious to hear about your experiences with it, and how it feels to lead a program in honor of MLK.



VP: It's one of the programs I look forward to the most because it's a real celebration of community. And having Dr. Caldwell (*pictured left*) there every year — he does amazing work with the chorus, and he's such a magnetic presence when he conducts and when he leads. Just sharing the program with him is a tremendous honor for me.

This concert means a lot to the city, and it means a lot to us. And as a person of color in this field, it means a lot to me to conduct it. What I love every year is that we don't do the same thing. There's a lot of thought and creativity that goes into planning this.

JH: You mentioned how this is a real community event. Along those lines, I know there's a tradition of ending the concert with a singalong of Lift Every Voice and Sing.

VP: We invite everyone to join. I think it's a cathartic way to end the program after we've gone on this whole journey. As I said, the real key to this concert is community. And I think that inviting everyone to sing *Lift Every Voice* at the end is reflective of that.

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