

ChamberFest Cleveland: Zooming with cellist & rising star Jonathan Swensen

by Mike Telin



When looking at cellist Jonathan Swensen’s Facebook page, you can’t help but think that he is one busy guy. And one who has a good time doing what he does.

“I’m enjoying the traveling and the discovery that come with this life,” he said over Zoom. “Every audience and every hall has its special charm. I love experiencing different cultures. But it’s funny because I can go to so many places where I don’t speak anyone’s language, and be able to share something that comes from the heart. Something which any listener can

understand, and that is very nice.”

Leading up to Swensen’s ChamberFest Cleveland debut on Thursday, June 23 at 7:30 pm at the Cleveland Institute of Music’s Mixon Hall, I reached him at his home in Copenhagen.

Mike Telin: We’re looking forward to having you in Cleveland.

Jonathan Swensen: This will be my first visit and I’m excited about it. I also have not seen Roman Rabinovich — he’s that one who invited me — for ten years. So I’m looking forward to seeing familiar faces and meeting new people as well. And of course playing great music — they gave me a lot of good stuff.

MT: Your first piece is Mozart’s Divertimento in E-flat (June 23). It’s not easy.

JS: It's not, but it's a favorite of mine. I've only played it for an audition a long time ago so I'm looking forward to playing it at an actual concert. There's a completely different feel preparing it for a concert than for an audition, and personally, I prefer the concert.

It's beautiful, and the cello has quite a big role in it. Many people complain about Mozart not writing a cello concerto, but he did write some great cello parts in his last string quartets and this trio. Even his early quartets — a simple bassline can be one of the hardest things to play well, and I find it highly enjoyable. It's simple and genius so it's hard not to love it.

MT: You do have some really great pieces — in addition to the Mozart you have Fritz Kreisler's Three Pieces for Piano Trio (June 24), Beethoven's Trio in E-flat (June 25), and Franck's Piano Trio in f-sharp (June 30).

JS: They gave me a lot of trios, and I'm playing with so many amazing musicians.

MT: The Debussy Sonata with pianist Juho Pohjonen (June 30) is also on your list of assignments.

JS: I've been playing this since I was sixteen and every time I do, I find things that I haven't noticed before — new textures and colors. It's a remarkable piece. It's amazing how much beauty can be delivered within the course of ten minutes, and this sonata is a strong example of that. And to get to play it with Juho is incredibly exciting.

But the most challenging work of the two weeks is Anna Thorvaldsdottir's *In the Light of Air* (July 1). It's written in a way that is more than notes on a page. Every sound has a unique marking, so I need to study what every single sign means to know what to do at any given moment. This is a new way of thinking for me and I'm very excited about it. It's the first time I'm playing a contemporary piece with this kind of complexity.

But my theory is that when looking at the score, it looks complex, but once you delve into the language it begins to simplify itself — the big horizons begin to make sense. In a way, I think it's just a matter of cracking the code. I'm still in the process of doing that but it's very interesting and a lot of fun to work on.

MT: What are your plans for the rest of the summer?

JS: After ChamberFest I'm going back to Copenhagen and playing a lot of festivals. I live 50/50 between Boston and Copenhagen. I like to be in Denmark in the summer — I was born here and all of my friends are here. And the summer is the busiest season for

classical musicians in Denmark because there are festivals everywhere. I'm playing in one that I co-created called Festival & Friends the week after ChamberFest.

Then I'm going to Poland for a festival. But September is the busiest month of the year for me. I'm playing both the Schumann Concerto and the Brahms Double. I'm also playing a solo recital program and my CD will be out by then, so there's a lot of exciting stuff happening.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com June 22, 2022.

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