

## ChamberFest Cleveland: exploring the visual experience with Nicholas Houfek

by Stephanie Manning



It's unconventional to interview a lighting designer for an upcoming chamber music concert. But then again, a performance of Anna Thorvaldsdottir's *In the Light of Air* is unconventional, too.

The four-movement suite for viola, cello, harp, piano, percussion, and electronics has a long history with the International Contemporary Ensemble (IntCE), but a new group of players will take it on for a concert as part of ChamberFest Cleveland on July 1. As lighting designer and current IntCE member Nicholas Houfek explained in a recent conversation, the difficulty with programming the piece lies in the logistics of the installation.

"We've had other people reach out, but once they hear what's needed and required to install it, a lot of them kind of get scared and back away. It's a lot for a chamber music festival or organization to take on."

Houfek knows these requirements better than most — he's been involved with the piece since its inception, working closely with Thorvaldsdottir while she composed it for IntCE in 2014. Describing the piece's soundscape as "warm" and "natural" but also "otherworldly," he discussed how sound and light combine to create the finished product.

Inspired by Thorvaldsdottir's idea of a "constellation," Houfek overlayed a star map over a stage space and placed 36 clear, round lightbulbs throughout. He and sound engineer Levy Lorenzo then devised a way to make the lights respond in real time to the musicians. Over the course of the 43 minutes, Houfek maps the audio from different players to different sets of bulbs, all while adjusting how reactive the bulbs are. All of these changes are part of the score.

This means that the installation plays an essential, yet unusual role in the group. “I think some people would say it’s another member of the ensemble, but I think it’s the plane of existence where the sounds are happening.”

Since IntCE premiered the work eight years ago at the Reykjavik Arts Festival, Houfek and the ensemble have returned to it on an occasional basis, with performances around the United States and one in Copenhagen. It was at one of those appearances — the Big Ears Festival in Knoxville — that former ChamberFest executive director Jacqueline Taylor saw the performance and became interested in bringing the work to Cleveland.

Plenty of experience with the piece has given Houfek more confidence. “I wouldn’t say my approach has evolved so much as I’m more comfortable in my role. I’m accepting my agency that I have in the piece — knowing that Anna trusts me to make the right decisions.”

That feeling should serve him well in his work with the ChamberFest musicians. “I’m super curious what they play versus what I’m used to hearing,” Houfek said. “Like, what are the different variables and choices that were made, and maintained, throughout my relationship with the piece? What do new performers bring to it?”

Another adjustment will be the location. “It’s going to be in a cool venue that’s a warehouse type space — the Madison — and it’s got these exposed roof trusses that we’re going to span the bulbs across. There’s gonna be a skylight above them, so you can kind of watch the sun go down.”

There’s just one more change for Houfek to get used to. “We will have just one day to set up and rehearse before the show,” he said, with a bit of nervous laughter. “That’s not usual for this piece, but it’s also not the usual ensemble — it’s a different beast completely. So I have high hopes, and I’m looking forward to it.”

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