

## ChamberFest Cleveland 2022 “The Revelry We Need”

by Donald Rosenberg



*This essay was written as an overview of ChamberFest’s tenth season. It is reposted with the permission of the author and [ChamberFest Cleveland](#).*

If you’re reading these words, you don’t have to be convinced that chamber music is a gift — anytime, anywhere. But we should be especially grateful this year, when we have cravings to connect (reconnect?) on so many levels. The pandemic has continued to disrupt our lives. A senseless war has placed the world at risk. So why chamber music? And why now?

Why not? Chamber music brings musicians and audiences together in what could be considered a sacred ritual — the sharing of supreme works of art with an intimacy that brings us all closer together (safely). Think of it: For lovers of chamber music, little is



more rewarding than the eloquent, dramatic, and blissful discussions that composers devise for small groups of instruments and voices. For musicians, chamber music provides an atmosphere of collegiality and liberation, with opportunities to create interpretations on their own, free of autocracy from the podium.

So it may be no wonder that there’s a lot to celebrate in Cleveland this year on the chamber-music front. First, it’s the 10th season of ChamberFest Cleveland, which has brought the highest level of artistry to town even as it has embraced the true definition of a festival: an array of concerts and related events offered within a short period with a mission to stimulate, excite, and beguile.

Hyperbole? Just look at the lineup of music and composers on this year's nine programs. By my count, ChamberFest is presenting 28 works by 22 composers, not including the collection of spirituals that will be performed during the second program, "Spirited Away." Of those 22 composers, five are alive — a healthy percentage in a field that covets music by deceased European male composers. (No arguments here, please: We should never neglect the vast repertoire of great works from previous eras.)

Finding balance is the key, and ChamberFest has deftly walked the tightrope. Along with ample music by Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, Debussy, Ravel, and others of legendary persuasion, the festival includes pieces of more modern sensibility. Those with conservative tastes shouldn't be alarmed by the presence of the recent creations. They are, one and all, vibrant and moving — and, in at least one case, humorous — adventures in sound, with points of view that add much to the continuum of music history.



One of the composers with a pulse, Yevgeniy Sharlat, has written a commissioned piece for a quartet of his ChamberFest friends that is anticipated partly because it is scored for such an unusual combination (clarinet, violin, piano, and percussion). So are Kate Soper's *Only the Words Themselves Mean What They Say* (flutes and soprano) and Anna Thorvaldsdottir's *In the Light of Air* (harp, piano, percussion, viola, cello, and fixed electronics). Of the recent composers no longer with us, Galina Ustvolskaya and Alfred Schnittke are powerful creative voices whose music demands to be heard.



The composer represented by the most works (four) this year is George Walker, whose centenary in 2022 is being marked by performances throughout the United States and abroad. Walker (1922-2018) is finally receiving the attention he deserves after too many decades of neglect. A graduate, at the age of 18, of the Oberlin Conservatory, he had a promising career as a concert pianist — he was the first African-American musician to serve as a soloist with the Philadelphia Orchestra, in Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3, in 1950 — that was thwarted by racism.

Walker refocused his energies to composition, which he studied at the Curtis Institute of Music and Eastman School of Music. He wrote his earliest works in a post-Romantic style akin to that of Samuel Barber, also a Curtis graduate, and then flung the artistic door wide open as he embraced vernacular forms, including jazz and church hymns, and modernism in all its meanings and complexities.



What stands out in Walker's music is the meticulous sense of structure and clarity of harmonic thought, as well as the expressive scope. His catalogue numbers more than 90 compositions, from chamber pieces, including the ones that will be heard during

ChamberFest, to large-scale works, such as *Lilacs* for voice and orchestra, set to Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." In 1996, Walker was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in Music — the first African-American composer to be so honored — for *Lilacs*.

The performances of Walker's music on these programs might be some listeners' first encounters with these works, but the same possibly could be said for other enticing pieces this season. How often do we hear Fauré's Piano Quintet No. 1 in D minor, Franck's Piano Trio No. 1 in F-sharp minor, Op. 1, No. 1, or the three sonatas for various instruments that Debussy wrote in the last years of his life? What a joy to attend live concerts that feature Kodály's Duo for Violin and Cello, Op. 7, and two collections arranged of popular fare by beloved 20th-century violinists, Fritz Kreisler and Jascha Heifetz.



Then there's Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's radiant Quintet in F-sharp minor for Clarinet and Strings, Op. 10,

which will introduce a remarkable composer whose career was cut short by his death from pneumonia at the age of 37.

By avoiding formula and pushing the artistic envelope, ChamberFest is fulfilling the best ambitions of a music festival. And since we're all in the mood to be lifted to realms that reflect the best of humanity, the efforts of the festival's musicians must be regarded as essential and heroic. They are bringing visionary achievements by preeminent composers to visceral life, far from the Zoom-laden performances that dominated our existence for such an extended purgatory. We may not be out of the pandemic woods just yet, but institutions like ChamberFest provide bright signs that music will always inspire and strengthen us.



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