

The Cleveland Orchestra: a conversation with Vasily Petrenko

by Mike Telin



“I’ve been looking forward to this visit to Cleveland for quite a while,” an enthusiastic Vasily Petrenko said during a recent conversation. “I had a visit planned but it couldn’t happen because of COVID. So I am excited to see the Orchestra — it’s one of my favorites in the world.”

Tonight, Thursday, December 1 at 7:30 pm at Severance Music Center,

Petrenko will return to the Cleveland Orchestra podium to lead Elgar’s *Cockaigne* (“In London Town”), Prokofiev’s *Piano Concerto No. 2* with Behzod Abduraimov as soloist, and Walton’s *Symphony No. 1*. The program will be repeated on Friday at 11:00 am and on Saturday at 8:00 pm. Tickets are available [online](#).

Petrenko, who made his Cleveland Orchestra debut at Blossom in 2017 and returned the following summer, currently serves as music director of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, chief conductor of the European Union Youth Orchestra, conductor laureate of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and associate conductor of the Orquesta Sinfónica de Castilla y León.

I caught up with him via Zoom at his home in London — he had just returned from leading concerts in Germany with Radio Symphony Berlin and the SWR (The Southwest German Radio Orchestra). I began by reminding him that the last time we spoke he was in Wyoming at the Grand Teton Music Festival Orchestra.

Vasily Petrenko: That was a while ago.

Mike Telin: A lot has happened in your life since then.

VP: A lot has happened in all of our lives.

MT: We're looking forward to your Cleveland concerts — you're bringing an interesting program.

VP: Thanks. It is a program that includes British and Russian music, as well as an interesting combination of composers who were all at different stages in their lives, but roughly the same age when they were writing these pieces.

MT: I am not familiar with Elgar's Cockaigne [pronounced cocaine] ("In London Town") overture.

VP: Elgar was still in his early 30s when he wrote it. It's a youthful piece that imagines a journey through London at the edge of the 19th and 20th centuries — but it's not about cocaine as we know the drug. Starting in the 14th or 15th century, 'Cockaigne' was used as the name for a utopian land where the people were happy. Elgar took it as the name for the City of London, where at the time, people could live peacefully.

The piece takes you on an aural tour through the city. You hear church bells, and you visit some secret gardens, and even the Salvation Army comes marching through — and this all happens within seven or eight minutes.

MT: Prokofiev's Concerto No. 2 is amazing.

VP: He initially wrote it in 1913, and the piece premiered in St. Petersburg. The public, which always happens with new pieces, did not care for it, and the critics were divided. Some thought it was awful, but others thought that in ten years the public would want it to be performed. Also, when Prokofiev finished it, the person to whom the concerto is dedicated, (Maximilian Schmidthof) committed suicide.

Prokofiev left Russia in 1918 and went to Paris and didn't take the score with him — it was destroyed by fire during the Revolution. He most likely recomposed the entire concerto in 1923 before it was premiered in 1924. Interestingly, the Parisian public felt it was too traditional and not radical enough.

It is a darker piece and extremely virtuosic for the soloist — even Prokofiev, who was a great piano player, said that it took him a long time to learn the solo part. It's a long piece and has a number of cadenzas. It also requires a certain mental capacity.

MT: Have you worked with Behzod Abduraimov before?

VP: Quite a few times and it's always a pleasure to be onstage with him. We are also personally good friends.

MT: It's great to see Walton's first symphony on the program.

VP: He was also around 30 years old when he wrote it in 1933/34 and 35. The first three movements were premiered, then he wrote the last. The piece is a story about his private life. He was in love with the German Baroness Imma von Doernberg and the two had a much publicized break-up. In some of Walton's letters he attributes the problem to different views on what was happening in Germany in 1933.

He writes that the second movement is a "Scherzo con malizia," or "malicious scherzo." You almost feel like the Baroness is fighting with him. And the third is marked "Andante con malinconia," so this is post-love, dramatic effect being overcome. The first movement, in my opinion, is one of the most energetic ever written and has a lot of similarities with Beethoven's 5th symphony with its relentless energy.

It took Walton a while to compose the finale. And he had met another woman who was 22 years older than him but with whom he lived a happy life. So that left him with a very optimistic last movement. It's a journey to a new life and a new era, although the final pages don't sound so triumphant — perhaps he was questioning if he had gone too far in his optimism.

It's a long, energetic piece that shows the influence of Sibelius, particularly in its musical structure, and I am trying to promote it around the world because I think it is not played enough. There is so much repertoire that should be performed more often and this is one of those pieces. I am sure that the people who will come will enjoy it.

MT: What is it about British music of this period — Elgar, Walton, Vaughan Williams etc. — that makes it so recognizable?

VP: I wouldn't say that they are absolutely similar, but what probably unites them is bittersweetness — nostalgia. You feel that a great empire has vanished. And that bittersweetness is always present in their music.

MT: I'd like to switch topics to the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and the Journey of Discovery.

VP: Yes! It's a series that touches on all aspects of human society. You have to talk about it because it is the role of culture to lead society out of these crisis years, whether it's the

pandemic, the economy, or war. And now we have all three. But culture can lead people to discover long-term goals.

MT: Are you still conducting the youth orchestras?

VP: Last week we finalized the details to establish a new Youth Orchestra for the Orquesta Sinfónica de Castilla y León. But the plans with the Russian Youth Orchestra have been abandoned.

The war is a tragic situation. Personally I am half Russian and half Ukrainian. My Father is 85 and still lives in St. Petersburg and I have many close relatives who live in Kiev.

In a statement issued on March 1, 2022 Petrenko wrote: In response to these terrible events, I have decided to suspend my work in Russia, including all future commitments as Artistic Director of the State Academic Symphony Orchestra of Russia 'Evgeni Svetlanov,' until peace has been restored. I believe in the promotion of friendship and understanding across all boundaries. Peace must be restored as soon as possible.

I hope and pray that it will end very soon. But it is a very difficult and complex situation.

MT: It is a tragedy. And I hope your family is well. [long silence]

Vasily, thanks so much for taking the time to talk. But I need to ask, Are you a fan of Futbol?

VP: I am — I spent fifteen years in Liverpool and I am following the World Cup.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com December 1, 2022.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)