

**The Cleveland Orchestra
MLK Celebration: a chat
with emcee Peter Lawson Jones**

by Mike Telin



“When I was ten or eleven, my father was going to an MLK march. He asked me if I wanted to go and I didn’t. And that has been a regret of mine for a very long time,” Peter Lawson Jones recalled during a recent telephone conversation. “But this night will celebrate all that Dr. King did and I look forward to being part of it.”

On Sunday, January 15 at 7:00 pm at Severance Music Center, Jones will act as narrator and emcee when The Cleveland Orchestra presents its free, annual concert in honor of the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. under the direction of Daniel Reith. Jones will be joined by bass and narrator Soloman Howard and the all-volunteer Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration

Chorus, directed by William Henry Caldwell. Although the concert is sold out, it will be broadcast live on WCLV 90.3 and WKSU 89.7, with simultaneous streaming available at ideastream.org.

A Cleveland native, Jones is a graduate of Harvard College and Harvard Law School. From 2002 through 2010, he was a member of the Board of Cuyahoga County Commissioners, and its president for three of those years. He previously served two and a half terms in the Ohio House of Representatives, where he was the ranking member of the House Finance and Appropriations Committee and second vice president of the Ohio

Legislative Black Caucus. He has also been the Vice Mayor and a Councilman in the City of Shaker Heights.

Since leaving politics, Jones has enjoyed a celebrated career as a playwright, actor, and producer. He has a major supporting role in the new Tom Hanks film *A Man Called Otto*, which was released by Sony Pictures on Christmas Day in Los Angeles and New York City and can be seen around the country on Friday, January 13. “Working on that was a lot of fun,” he said, adding that a special red carpet advance screening of the film will take place at the Cinemark At Valley View theater complex the evening of January 12.

A few minutes into our conversation, his phone rang, and he apologized for taking the call. About a minute later he returned. “I’m glad I took that,” he said. “It was the Governor’s office asking me to sit on the board of the Ohio Arts Council.” (Jones and Kristie Dukes Davis of Cincinnati are new appointments, with terms ending July 1, 2026.)

Returning to the topic of the concert, he pointed out that while Martin Luther King Jr. Day became a federal holiday 40 years ago, Sunday will be the 43rd MLK Celebration Concert. “The Cleveland Orchestra was early to recognize the importance of MLK’s work,” he said. “And I am the most recent entry in a long list of people who have been part of an event that pays tribute to one of our great Americans — I thank the Orchestra for the foresight they had.”

Sunday’s program will feature music by Black composers including Florence Price and William L. Dawson, as well as Aaron Copland’s tribute to the 16th President of the United States, *A Lincoln Portrait*, marking 80 years since its premiere. Keeping with tradition, the concert will conclude with the powerful hymn *Lift Every Voice and Sing*.

“It’s a great program,” he said. “The script is by a fellow actor and friend of mine, Michael Oatman. But I’m especially excited about the Finale from Florence Price’s *Symphony No. 1* — my friend and fellow Clevelander Gerry Bryant has just recorded some of her piano music. And Thomas Dorsey’s *Precious Lord* was MLK’s favorite song and was sung at his funeral by Mahalia Jackson.”

Jones said that the MLK Celebration concert, which takes place in “the grandest hall in the city, with the world’s greatest orchestra and community chorus,” is an artistic expression of King’s values. “I’m 70 years old. But when my parents grew up, times were even more challenging for [minorities]. So I am aware that I am the beneficiary of the progress that has been made by all the people who moved the pendulum forward,” he said.

“It’s interesting that the month January is named for the Roman god Janus who has two faces — one looking back and one looking forward. So this concert is an annual reminder of all the progress that has been made, but also a reminder of what still needs to be done.”

Beginning at noon on Monday, January 16 the MLK Day celebration will continue at Severance with a **Free Community Day** — no tickets required — featuring performances by musicians of The Cleveland Orchestra, Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra, Cleveland Orchestra Youth Chorus, and a gospel ensemble.

At 1:00 pm, The Cleveland Orchestra Youth Chorus will present a program that celebrates life, searches for peace, and honors those who have fought for justice. It includes the Severance Music Center premiere of *Taloowa Chipota* (“Children’s Songs”) by Chickasaw composer Jerod Impichchaachaaha’ Tate. The performance will close with Mari Esabel Valverde’s *When Thunder Comes*, which recognizes the contributions of Harvey Milk, Helen Zia, Sylvia Mendez, and the volunteers of the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project.

At 2:00 pm, the *Crescendo!* program — a collaborative partnership between The Cleveland Orchestra, Cleveland School of the Arts (CSA), Tri-C Creative Arts Academy, and select Cleveland Metropolitan School District K-8 schools — will perform music by Rosamund J. Johnson, Brian Balmages, Reynard Berns, and original works by CSA alumnus Damian Goggans.

At 4:00 pm, Daniel Reith will lead The Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra in works by Hailstork, Prokofiev, Saint-Saëns, Walker, and Brahms.

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