

Cleveland Cello Society: *i Cellisti! 2023*

by Mike Telin

“A cello society is supposed to promote the advancement of the instrument and bring professionals, amateurs, and lovers of the cello together for a rich exchange of ideas. And the Cleveland Cello Society embodies that,” Cleveland Orchestra principal cello Mark Kosower said during a telephone conversation.

On Friday, March 24 at 7:00 pm at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Cleveland Heights, Cleveland Cello Society will present *i Cellisti! 2023*, their annual extravaganza that raises funds for their Scholarship Competition. Closing out the evening will be a mass cello ensemble performance of Randall Thomson’s *Alleluia*. Cellists of all ages and experience are invited to participate. Click [here](#) for more information and tickets.

The evening will begin with a performance by Kosower of two works for solo cello.

He noted that as the title suggests, Hans Werner Henze’s *Serenade* is a light-hearted and entertaining work. “It is a twelve-tone piece, but it doesn’t really sound like it. I find the dissonances to be rather mild in general, and it proves that in the hands of a great composer, great music can be made out of the twelve-tone system.”

He added that the work’s “entertainment factor” is found in its ten short movements that take no more than ten minutes to perform. “There’s a pastoral, a march, a tango, and there’s one that reminds you of Hindemith *Gebrauchsmusik*. There’s also a lot of guitar-style strumming. It’s very charming and unless somebody told you, I don’t think you’d know it’s a twelve-tone piece.”

The cellist described Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson’s *Lamentations, Black/Folk Song Suite* as a great piece that creates a niche in the cello repertoire. “It’s not unlike what composers like Ginastera and others did, where they combined European art forms with folk music from the Western Hemisphere — in this case Black folk songs, the blues, and rhythms. It’s a combination that results in a unique musical language and I don’t know of any other music for cello quite like it.”

The work's first movement, "Fuguing Tune," refers to the English tradition of choral singing that was popular in the Eastern U.S. in the late 1700s and eventually found its way to African American churches in the South. During the second, "Song Form," the composer adds emotional impact through the use of "blue" notes and sighing phrases, while the all-pizzicato third movement, "Calvary Ostinato," is based on the refrain from an African American spiritual. While "Surely he died on Calvary" refers to the place where Jesus was crucified, it is also seen as a reference to lynching. And in the final movement, "Perpetual Motion," innovative rhythms from Black folk music are incorporated into the continuous moving line.

Kosower said that while he has been performing the Henze for a few years, the Perkinson has been sitting on his shelf for decades. That was until 2021 when, because of COVID, The Cleveland Orchestra took their annual Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration online.

"They were making all these different videos and they asked for a solo cello piece by a Black American composer. And I started thinking — what is that piece on my shelf that I've never had a chance to look at? So I looked at it and quickly realized what a wonderful piece it is. He is an example of another great American composer that falls outside of the white American tradition. Ives, Copland, and Bernstein are the names we are accustomed to thinking of, but I think it's wonderful that in recent years, the composers who are outside of that conventional thinking have given a much more diverse and complete view of what it means to be an American classical composer."

Kosower will then be joined by six additional cellists for Douglas Moore's cello ensemble transcription of Édouard Lalo's *Cello Concerto*.

"Moore taught at Williams College for many years. We have an Indiana connection in that he studied with Fritz Magg, the great Austrian cellist who taught at IU for decades, and I was there with János Starker. Indiana has such a great cello ensemble tradition with the Eva Janzer weekend — she was the cellist in the Grumiaux Trio who also taught there, and after her passing, Starker started this weekend to honor her. He would invite someone from the international community to come to Bloomington to perform, give classes, and be honored for their contributions to the cello world."

The Janzer weekend would also include cello ensemble performances, and Douglas Moore was responsible for many of the arrangements. "He arranged quite a few of the standard concertos as well as orchestral works and things like Gesualdo madrigals. He's a gifted arranger and talented musician, and I think this is a very good arrangement of the concerto." Click [here](#) to learn more about Moore's output.

Kosower said that the Lalo Concerto is a perfect fit for an ensemble arrangement. “It’s the type of work with solo voice and orchestral accompaniment, versus the Dvořák which is more like a symphonie concertante.”

And, it’s nice that people will realize that Lalo wrote something other than *Symphonie Espagnole*. “It’s funny because that’s the piece that made him famous, and then he wrote this concerto on the heels of that. It has a lot of the same Spanish influences and flavors in it. And structurally, he was influenced by the symphonies of Beethoven, which at the time were popular in Paris. So even though the musical language is clearly French with a strong Spanish influence, in terms of how it’s put together, there are definitely Germanic elements.”

Kosower said that while it is most often used as part of a “cello hangout” — a get-together for fun — the cello ensemble can also be a serious medium. “It is one of the most colorful and versatile instruments. And it covers the entire spectrum of the human voice and the orchestral sound world — with the exception of the double bass range.”

He noted that cellists are “kind of groupies of the instrument” who enjoy being in each other’s company and making music together. “I have to say that Ida Mercer is the engine behind the Cleveland Cello Society. She is the founder, and the inclusiveness and spirit of bringing people together to promote the cello really comes from her.”

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