

Cleveland Ballet: an evening of firsts

by Mike Telin



Many exciting things are happening for the Cleveland Ballet. On Friday, April 21 and on Saturday April 22 at 7:00 pm at Connor Palace Theatre at Playhouse Square, the company will for the first time present George Balanchine's *Serenade*.

The program also includes the Company's first commissioned musical score, *Symphony of Life* by Israeli composer Anna Segal. And both works will be performed with the newly formed Cleveland Ballet Orchestra under the direction of Caleb Young. Tickets are available [online](#).

Segal's works are regularly performed by many orchestras and ensembles including the Berliner Symphoniker, London Mozart Players Orchestra, Ukraine National

Philharmonic Orchestra, and The Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra.

During a recent Zoom conversation, Segal said the commission came about in the usual way. "Someone has a big idea and is looking for a way to make it a reality." In this case it was Cleveland Ballet co-founder, President & CEO Michael Krasnyansky. "He called me and told me about the artist team — violinist and music advisor Alexandra (Lexi) Preucil, choreographer Iliia Zhivoi, and conductor Caleb Young — and said they were looking for a composer."

The opportunity to compose her first ballet piqued her curiosity. "I usually only compose symphonic music — symphony, oratorio, and cantatas — I also have some chamber pieces. But when Michael told me about the possibility of composing a ballet, I said yes!"

When Segal thinks of ballet scores she said her thoughts turn to composers such as Stravinsky, Prokofiev, and Debussy. She added that her music is tonal. “Today there are so many musical styles that it is a challenge for composers to create something that is new. And when the public hears a new piece they say ‘it sounds like this or that composer.’ But sometimes it is nice, because when someone says that my music sounds like Stravinsky, I say thank you.”

The creative process began slowly, with email exchanges and Zoom conversations between Segal and the rest of the team. “Everybody was in a different place so this made things easier,” she said.

Segal quickly got to work composing the score, but after sending the first sketch to Krasnyansky and the company’s co-founder and Artistic Director Gladisa Guadalupe, the composer said she was completely surprised. “They liked it — it was love at first sight. The entire team is made up of wonderful artists, and each person brings something special to the production. Lexi is a great musician, Caleb is responsible like a conductor should be, and Ilia is a very deep thinker.”

She noted that her compositions are program music and that she likes to have a story to share with the audience. And what is the story in *Symphony of Life*? “I was thinking about a global concept — life and the dramatic situations that have happened during the last few years — like COVID, the war in Ukraine and many other tragic situations. And the ballet is about the role of the artist inside all of this.”

In her ballet, the character of Hero is an artist who is looking for beauty, catharsis and moments of creative inspiration.

Destiny is beautiful but very strong, and when she invites Artist to come to her world he goes. But Destiny’s world is like a dream that is full of illusions that Artist cannot connect to.

Muse is also beautiful, but very soft and gentle. Hero tries to catch her but she disappears.

Although Artist feels something for Muse, Destiny won’t let him go. They start to fight, but Artist loses because Destiny’s power is too strong.

Then Muse reappears alongside Destiny, and Artist needs to choose between the two.

“He chooses Muse, not just because she is a woman, but because of her creativity and life. That’s why the Ballet is called *Symphony of Life*. I know that a happy ending doesn’t

always exist in the world, but I don't want to say that there are no happy endings because we still have hope. And I think it is important during these complicated times to let people feel that there is light ahead.”

Asked about the instrumentation, Segal said that because her thirty-minute ballet is sharing the program with the Tchaikovsky *Serenade*, she decided to continue with a string orchestra. “But I've added flutes, clarinet, bassoon, and horn. I also included an instrument that I am in love with — the harp.”

The composer could not be happier with the way rehearsals have been going. “I was overwhelmed by the rehearsal I saw,” she said. “It was amazing because I didn't imagine dance when I was composing the score but sometimes I *did* see some images in my head. And when I saw what Ilia was doing with the choreography, I had those same emotions when I was composing the music. I'm not a sentimental person but there were two moments that I had feelings that were close to crying.”

Segal feels lucky to be working with a great artistic team, because it's often difficult to find people who understand a composer's language and ideas. “But here we have reached the point where we don't need to explain it to each other, it just happens. The entire team is breathing together and I like that very much. It's all about the creative process.”

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