

**ChamberFest 2023:**  
*Lightness of Being*

by Mike Telin



From the beginning, ChamberFest Cleveland's programming has centered around creative themes such as *The Big Bang* (2012), *Crossing Borders* (2015), and most recently *X* (2022). For season eleven, which runs from June 14 through July 1, the Festival takes on a literary slant with *Lightness of Being*.

During a Zoom conversation with Roman Rabinovich and Diana Cohen — two of the Festival's

three artistic directors — Rabinovich said that he has been a fan of Milan Kundera's 1984 novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* for many years. "Last summer I reread it, I think for the third time, and it really pulled me in. It's rich in ideas that are very deep but also entertaining and timeless. And Kundera is also an amazing writer about music — you can tell he has a deep knowledge of classical music."

Cohen added that like music, that novel explores every aspect of the human condition with its archetypes of personalities, relationships, politics, war, and culture. "It explores so many different multitudes that we decided to see what we could do with it."

One example of how the novel inspired the programming is "Fidelity and Betrayal" (June 17). In his program note, Donald Rosenberg writes that the character of Sabina "lives life as if she knows it is short and to be relished in the moment. The result is a tendency to see relationships as temporary and disposable. As Kundera writes of Sabina, 'Betrayal means breaking ranks and going off into the unknown.'"

The program features Paquito D’Rivera’s *Three Pieces for Clarinet and Piano*, Franz Waxman’s *Carmen Fantasie*, Jean Sibelius’s *Svartsjukans Nätter* (“Nights of Jealousy”), Franz Schubert’s *Fantasie in f*, and an improvisatory collaboration between clarinetist Ismail Lumanovski and percussionist Jamey Haddad.

“There’s so much fidelity and betrayal in this program,” Cohen said. “In particular, the Sibelius. It’s just a riveting and very evocative score for piano trio, narrator, and offstage voice. It’s unpublished, and as far as we can tell never been performed in North America, so we had to dig deep into the Sibelius family network to get permission to play it.”

Cohen said that although they had a contact at the library in Finland that housed parts, they were told that they needed to get permission from the Sibelius family to perform the work. “We asked for permission but we didn’t get an answer.” In the end, Cohen was able to connect on Facebook with electric bassist and composer Lauri Porra, Sibelius’s great-grandson. “We had a nice conversation. He said, ‘It’s one of my favorite pieces, and as a composer myself, I wish that people valued that work as much as I do.’ So somehow he was able to get permission.”

Another example of how Kundera’s novel inspired a program is “Words Misunderstood” (June 30), which includes György Ligeti’s *Poème symphonique* (for 100 metronomes), Caroline Shaw’s *Limestone & Felt*, Gabriella Smith’s *Carrot Revolution*, and Max Bruch’s *String Octet in B-flat*.

Here Rosenberg writes of “the characters of the painter Sabina and her lover, the professor Franz, [who] are constantly testing one another’s limits. ‘If I were to make a record of all Sabina and Franz’s conversations, I could compile a long lexicon of their misunderstandings,’ Kundera writes.”

Rabinovich said that in the chapter titled “Words Misunderstood,” Kundera talks about how people use certain words, but those words mean something completely different to the person who is listening — “like words that certain cultures immediately understand, but a person who is not from that culture simply can’t connect to it.”

He added that the same can be said of the Dadaist movement and the Art of the Absurd which Ligeti was experimenting with in the ‘60s. “This idea of the absurd and the grotesque — *Poème symphonique* is all about that. And what can be more absurd than 100 metronomes?”

Although the Ligeti was used as the starting point, Cohen said they wanted the program to feature works that were off the beaten track. “Gabriella Smith’s *Carrot Revolution* is

basically rock music for string quartet, but it's very attractive, as is Caroline Shaw's *Limestone & Felt*."

The eleventh edition of ChamberFest also offers plenty of opportunities to hear works that everyone will know and love, including Brahms' *Sextet* and Mozart's *Piano and Wind Quintet* (June 21), Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 12* and Poulenc's *Sextet* (June 25), Mozart's *Viola Quintet* (June 16), and Mozart's *Clarinet Quintet* (July 1).

"There's a lot of Mozart this season," Rabinovich said. "In our minds he represents brilliance and lightness. I'm also excited about Sergey Taneyev's *Piano Quintet in g* (June 29). Everyone knows Schumann, Dvořák, and Brahms, but Taneyev was an extremely important figure in music of that time. He was a very influential teacher and was considered the Russian Brahms because of his knowledge of counterpoint."

Click [here](#) for a complete Festival schedule and to purchase tickets.

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