

**ChamberFest Cleveland:
Robin VanLear has fun with
*The Carnival of the Animals***

by Mike Telin



There are times when we all — even composers — need a little fun in our lives.

On February 9, 1886 Camille Saint-Saëns wrote to his publisher, saying that although he *should* be working on his Third Symphony, he was writing a piece for Shrove Tuesday that was “... *mais c’est si amusant!*” (such fun). That “fun” piece, which premiered on March 3, 1886, was none other than *Le Carnaval des animaux* (“The Carnival of the Animals”).

While Saint-Saëns forbade the 14-movement comical piece to be performed in public, feeling it would damage his reputation as a serious composer, lucky for us, the piece was published after the composer’s death and has since become one of his most popular works.

On Saturday, June 24 at 7:30 pm, ChamberFest Cleveland will present a staged production of the zoological fantasy at CIM’s Kulas Hall. The program also features György Ligeti’s *Six Bagatelles*, Salina Fisher’s *Kintsugi for Piano Trio*, and Lukas Foss’s *Capriccio for Cello and Piano*. Tickets are available [online](#).

Jeremy Johnson, President and CEO of Assembly for the Arts, will have the honor of reciting the 1949 poems by Ogden Nash that accompany each movement of the Saint-Saëns, beginning with the poet having some fun with the composer’s name.

Camille St. Saëns was wracked with pains
When people addressed him as “Saint Sains.”

He held the human race to blame
Because it could not pronounce his name.
So he turned with metronome and fife
To glorify other forms of life.
Be quiet, please, for here begins
His salute to feathers, furs, and fins.

For the staging, ChamberFest has enlisted the always creative Robin VanLear.

I caught up with the founder and director of Parade the Circle by phone — she was paper-macheing at the time — and began our conversation by asking what she has in store for audiences.

Robin VanLear: I'll start with the dancers. There's Stephanie Roston and Joshua Brown from Inlet Dance Theatre, Kenya Woods who's a faculty teacher at Case, and Story Reinhart-Cadiz. I've worked with them a lot in the past.

In addition to the youth from Inlet there will be youth from Village Family Farms. They don't have a dance background, but I have worked with that organization for a number of years. They participated in Parade the Circle, and the gentleman who started it, Jamel Rahkeera, wanted something for his kids to work on, so I mentioned this project.

Mike Telin: Can you tell me about the costuming?

RVL: As far as the pieces that we're using, they are ones that I had in my collection along with a few that my daughter made primarily for Parade the Circle. Then there's an artist who is loaning us her chicken mask for the chicken and the roosters section.

There are also a few new pieces, primarily the lion and the cuckoo, which is a very large bird — about nine feet tall. It's bright pink and black. That will be the one true puppet — the others are more like large masks.

The kids are going to populate the aquarium, the aviary, and the fossils. The birds are going to be mobiles and the fish will be manipulated. My goal with the bones is to have the kids holding various skeletal parts of the dinosaur so that it looks like the dinosaur as they move. We'll see how that works.

MT: Even if people don't know the piece, they will certainly recognize "The Swan." What do you have in store for that?

RVL: Stephanie Roston is going to perform that as a ballerina. So we're using the white, very short, classic tutu, and she's going to interpret it in a very classical sense.

MT: I'm curious, how are you representing the pianists?

RVL: The pianists are actually going to be wearing what we call big heads, which are made of paper-mache, and they look like people with very large heads. So it's a little bit comical, because I think that piece is sort of poking fun at the pianists. So they will be mimicking the playing as if they're dueling with each other.

MT: What costume, or piece, excites you?

RVL: Well, the lion headpiece is going to be kind of exaggerated. I've been doing a lot of work with recycled materials lately, so that headpiece is going to be made out of cardboard and paper-mache but with the coloring coming from cereal boxes and soda boxes, things like that. We'll see if this happens, but my idea is that the mane is going to be spirals of aluminum cans. So it'll be very large, kind of shaggy, and very expressive.

I'm really excited about this project. It was fun to go through my costumes and see what would work for these different pieces. Actually the tortoise is being represented by pieces of mine from a couple of different things. One of them was a tortoise that I did a few years ago for Cleveland Opera on Tour, when we basically represented the tortoise just with the headpiece and the shell, which was made on a hula hoop. So the tortoise will actually carry its shell as it does that very slow can-can movement that the piece alludes to — which I always thought was so fun.

MT: Before you took on this project, how familiar were you with the work?

RVL: I was actually very familiar with it. When I was in high school, I played in a youth symphony, and I was one of the pianists for *The Carnival of the Animals*. I tell people it kind of ended my wanting to have a performing career because we played it in all these different high school auditoriums, and usually the pianos had to be down on the floor in front of the stage, so the audience was about a foot away. That was very unnerving for a 17-year-old.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com June 15, 2023.

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