

Cellist Zlatomir Fung brings Shostakovich for his July 22 Cleveland Orchestra debut

by Mike Telin



If asked, many musicians can tell you exactly when they heard a piece of music that changed their lives. For Zlatomir Fung that piece was Shostakovich's *Cello Concerto No. 1*. "I must have been eleven years old," Fung recalled during a recent interview. "I believe it was the debut recording that Rostropovich made with the Philadelphia Orchestra, and it was one of the first cello videos that was on YouTube. I came across it and I was just blown away. And that was the recording that made me want to be a cellist."

On Saturday, July 22 at 7:00 pm, Fung will bring that concerto to the Blossom Music Center stage when he makes his

Cleveland Orchestra debut. The program, under the direction of Kahchun Wong, also includes Yasushi Akutagawa's *Music for Symphony Orchestra* and Debussy's *La mer*. Tickets are available [online](#).

I caught up with the celebrated young cellist by phone and began by asking him to share his thoughts about playing with The Cleveland Orchestra for the first time.

Zlatomir Fung: The biggest thing for me is that it's just a huge honor to be collaborating with this ensemble. I'm pretty anxious about it, but I guess the anxiety is coming from a place of wanting to put my best foot forward because I know it will be an amazing opportunity to do something really great.

Mike Telin: You're bringing a very popular concerto with you. Does that add any pressure to the situation?

ZF: I think it does. My relationship with this concerto is a bit odd because I've known it for a long time, but on the other hand, I actually haven't played it a lot. So I'm excited to finally get the chance to play it again.

MT: I'm curious about what goes through your head at the very beginning. You just get a downbeat and then you're off. And a whole lot of responsibility falls on your shoulders — like tempo. Do you think about that or do you just go for it?

ZF: What you bring up is really interesting because the soloist does set the tempo, and the tempo doesn't change for the entirety of the first movement. And the music is at times like machinery, so it's got to be the right tempo at the beginning. So what I'm thinking is a combination of 'OK, breathe,' and 'Everything's going to be OK.'

MT: It is a beautiful piece, but it takes a lot of endurance.

ZF: Absolutely. It's kind of an open secret among cellists that this piece is one of the most difficult in terms of the physical endurance needed just to make it through. You can see at the very end of Rostropovich's first video recording that he was so tired in his right hand, he had to sort of hold his bow with his fist rather than the normal bow hold. So part of the preparation for me is to try to mitigate the degree to which fatigue impacts the ability to play at my best at the end.

MT: And then Shostakovich throws that entire third-movement cadenza at you.

ZF: I think the cadenza is some of the most brilliant solo cello writing ever. Just the way that Shostakovich uses the single instrument, and the different kinds of sonorities he gets with the combination of double stops, fast notes, and melodic lines in the different registers — I think it's really wonderful and it's a joy to play.

But the second half of the cadenza is one very big buildup from the very lowest register of the cello in pianissimo to the highest in fortissimo. So part of the challenge is having that big crescendo feel like one idea that's growing as the music evolves.

MT: Do you think about any of the political references that Shostakovich has thrown into the piece?

ZF: I think that like with a lot of Shostakovich's music, even if it's not explicit, there's always some reference to war. Even a small thing like choosing the horn for a particular melody, or something fanfare-like.

I do think this concerto is a little less overt than the second, which he wrote about ten years later. But with this one there's definitely a lot of angst. At the same time, there's also a chamber music aspect to it because many times the orchestration is actually quite sparse. One of my favorite moments in the first movement is when there's just a single French horn and the solo cello, and somehow he manages to make it sound like a full orchestra. But there is an element of intimacy because there are only two people.

MT: Are you a fan of Shostakovich in general?

ZF: Absolutely. I think he's a wonderful composer, and his music is very powerful and affecting for listeners. I love his sense of rhythm in particular and the ease with which he takes what is often a relatively simple design and creates a lot of interest without doing a lot of acrobatics.

MT: Have you worked with Kahchun Wong before?

ZF: I haven't, but I'm looking forward to meeting him and working with him.

MT: You were just in town for ChamberFest Cleveland, and I couldn't help but notice on your website that your schedule is filled with chamber music performances over the next couple of months. Is that by design?

ZF: Yes. I think in the summer especially, it's nice to play chamber music. There are a lot of festivals where you can go for a week and play with different people and get to know them. And then you can go to another place and do the same thing, but with a different crowd. I love doing it because it opens your world to music that you wouldn't otherwise work on. Like at ChamberFest — *The Carnival of the Animals* was one of those rare experiences where it really opened my sense of Saint-Saëns. Of course, he is a composer who wrote a lot of cello music, both concertos and sonatas. So seeing an aspect of his voice in a completely different context was so enriching for me.

MT: You have won so many awards, fellowships, and competitions — how did all of that help you establish a career?

ZF: It's a good question. I think there was a certain time — like a couple of years ago, basically pre-pandemic — where the opportunity to apply for, and be in competitions was the path to just getting my name out there. Beyond that, it was also good motivation,

because preparing for a big moment like the Tchaikovsky Competition takes so much preparation and focus. And I think improvement goes along with that regardless of what happens at the competition itself.

I was, of course, extremely lucky that I did well at many of those competitions. It's such an odd thing, whether your taste intersects with a particular group of people in a way that favors you. I was very lucky that in many cases it did. And that helped me get to the next phases of my career, like getting a commercial manager and having the opportunity to play with orchestras of a certain caliber. So it was sort of a personal thing that I wanted to do just to push myself.

It's interesting when I look back. It seemed like such a challenge, but I see now that having a career is actually the larger challenge. Making a splash is one thing, but to consistently give performances that make people want to hear you again, or tell their friends about it, is a tougher proposition.

MT: But being the youngest person to ever win the Tchaikovsky Competition will be with you forever.

ZF: Thanks. Of course it's still a big aspect of my biography — you know, it occurs in the first paragraph. But my ultimate goal is that one day it will be replaced with something else.

MT: Now, I understand you're into playing blitz chess — how does it work?

ZF: Typically I play on the internet. I just set a clock and each player has three minutes to play the whole game, so it's a maximum of six minutes long. It's kind of my pastime, although it did become a bit of an addiction. So I had to delete some of my chess apps.

MT: How many people are out there playing it?

ZF: It's kind of exploded in popularity in the past couple of years. It started during the pandemic, because a lot of people didn't have anything to do, so they took up new hobbies — and chess is a great hobby. Then a lot of celebrities started playing chess. So now I'd say that the global player base is huge. When I play on the internet, I'm paired with people from all over the world instantly. There are so many people looking for a game at any given moment that you just click play and within two seconds, you're paired.

MT: Wow. But you've never had to be called out of the dressing room because you forgot you needed to be on stage?

ZF: I try not to play during the intermissions.

MT: Is there anything else you would like to tell people?

ZF: Just that I'm so honored to be coming to Blossom and I hope people enjoy the concert.

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