

Kahchun Wong brings Akutagawa, Shostakovich, and Debussy to Blossom this weekend

by Mike Telin

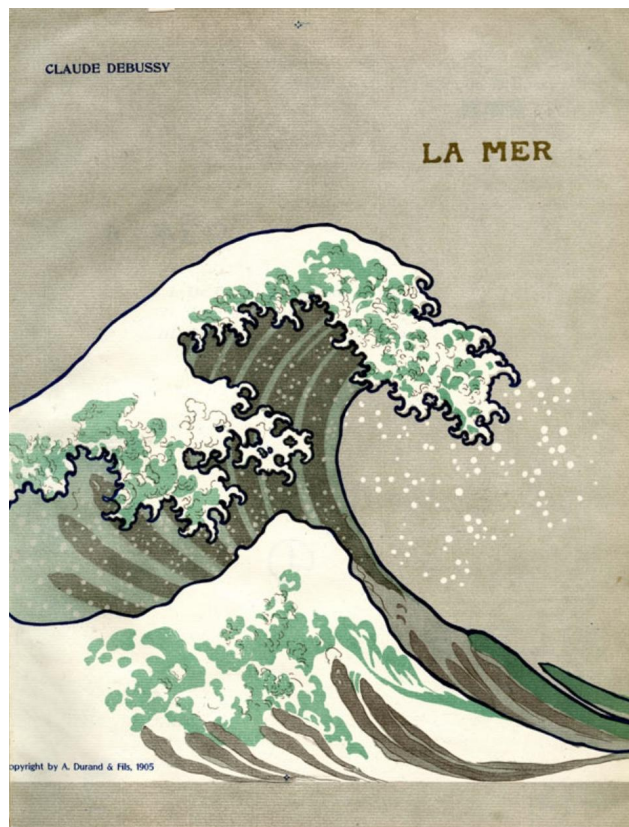


The opportunity for conductor Kahchun Wong to make his Cleveland Orchestra debut in April of 2022 came when visa issues prevented François-Xavier Roth from leading that week's concerts. On Saturday, July 22 at 7:00 pm, Wong will return to the podium, this time at Blossom Music Center, to lead a program that includes Yasushi Akutagawa's *Music for Symphony Orchestra*, Shostakovich's *Cello Concerto No. 1* with Zlatomir Fung as soloist, and Debussy's *La mer*. Tickets are available

[online.](#)

"I'm so excited to be returning to Cleveland, especially with this program," Wong said during a telephone call from his home near Kanagawa, Japan. He added that it was fitting for us to be talking on Monday, July 17. "Today is Sea Day — it's a public holiday and there are a lot of festivals." He noted that the holiday is a time for people to give thanks for the sea. "Where I live — on the coast — I can see Mt. Fuji. It always gives me inspiration. And today it, and the sea, are beautiful."

The Singaporean conductor said where he lives is part of the reason *La mer* is a favorite of his. "It is such a beautiful tone poem and I'm drawn to it because of its influences from Western and Eastern classical music. Debussy was interested in Eastern culture. In fact, for the first printing of the score for *La mer*, he asked his publisher to include a print of Katsushika Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*."



Wong, who will become chief conductor of the Japan Philharmonic Orchestra (JPO) this season after having served as principal guest conductor since 2021, said that composer Yasushi Akutagawa is one of Japan's great secrets. "While everyone knows Tōru Takemitsu, Akutagawa's music stays mostly in Japan. I was not familiar with his music until a few years ago." *Music for Symphony Orchestra* was written in 1950 for the Japan Philharmonic as part of the orchestra's project to commission works by Japanese composers. The work also reflects the composer's love of the music of Shostakovich and Prokofiev.

"Akutagawa was a rebel," Wong said. "He literally snuck into the Soviet Union in 1954, at a time when Japan did not have diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. But he made friends with Shostakovich, Khachaturian, and others. And Akutagawa was also the only Japanese composer whose works were published in the Soviet Union at that time."

While Wong is a lover of Western classical music, he also said that he needs to feel connected to his own heritage, and that this program brings those things together. "That's why I was so excited to have Shostakovich — a composer Akutagawa knew — on the program. I've never worked with Zlatomir Fung but I am looking forward to it — I know he's fantastic."

In addition to leading the JPO, Wong will begin his tenure as principal guest conductor of the Dresden Philharmonic this season, and beginning with the 2024-2025 season he will become the principal conductor and artistic advisor of The Hallé.

In spite of his busy schedule — and negotiating time zones — Wong still makes time to bring music to kids. In a 2022 interview with this publication, he spoke about Project Infinitude, an initiative he co-founded with Marina Mahler that works closely with Child At Street 11, a Singaporean non-profit agency supporting children from underserved and diverse backgrounds.

“Most of the kids from that project have now graduated,” he said this week, “but we’re starting a new project that will launch on Saturday.” Wong said that he wouldn’t miss the launch, even if he will have to attend virtually. “I need to be up at 4:00 am, but I’m used to time zone differences.”

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