

Cleveland Museum of Art's Performing Arts Series returns

by Mike Telin



The Cleveland Museum of Art's Performing Arts Series is back with a new director and a full schedule of diverse shows. To get a sense of it all, I spoke with Gabe Pollack, who came to that post at the Museum after many years of serving as manager of the Bop Stop. Here's what he told me.

I started the job in October 2022 and I inherited three programs. A couple were rescheduled concerts that had been canceled during COVID. And since booking those shows was taken off my plate, that allowed me to just learn the processes involved with producing a show at the Museum.

This 2023-24 season is truly my first Performing Arts Series. The "Summer Solstice" and "City Stages" are signature programs of the Museum. But they operate

separately from the Performing Arts Series in Gartner. So when I was hired, my main task was to program those events.

I had a lot of fun booking "Solstice." I think it takes a mix of skill and luck, especially when dealing with international artists because they have to be in the U.S. and have permits that allow them to perform here. And they have to be in the region around the time of "Solstice." But I thought the artists complemented each other very well.

"City Stages" in Hingetown has always been one of my favorite things from CMA. It's held across the street from Bop Stop, so I would always duck over and check out some of the shows. So I was really excited to program it this summer.

Pollack walked me through the series as it stands to date.

**Friday, September 9 at 12:00 pm in CMA's Morley Family Lecture Hall
— Soh-Hyun Park Altino: Traditional Korean Sanjo on the Violin (free, no reservation required)**

For this one I partnered with one of the Museum's curators, and the concert coincides with the exhibition *Material and Immaterial in Korean Modern and Contemporary Art*. Soh-Hyun Park Altino will discuss and perform the world premiere of the violin version of *The Long Sanjo*.



Wednesday, October 4 at 7:30 pm in Gartner Auditorium — The Grog Shop and CMA Present Arooj Aftab, Vijay Iyer, and Shahzad Ismaily: Love in Exile

Love in Exile is the name of this trio, but I think it's appropriate to list their names because each of them is a powerhouse.

Arooj is a Pakistani artist who has been around for a little while. But she became very popular after she won a 2021 Grammy for Best Global Performance. And she was the first Pakistani musician to win a Grammy. She's never performed in Cleveland, so I'm pumped about this.

Vijay is a world-renowned Grammy-nominated jazz pianist who has performed at the Museum before. Shahzad is most famous for being a session player with Lou Reed. I feel like he's one of these guys that a lot of people have heard but don't necessarily know by name.

To me, their music is amazingly beautiful. I love Arooj's voice — it is so pure. When I listen to music I want something that will mellow me out and Arooj does for me. I also feel like the Trio has created a sound that is specific to the three of them.

The show is a partnership with Grog Shop, and these co-productions, where the Museum partners with other Cleveland organizations, are something that people should expect more of from the performing arts program.

Wednesday, October 11 at 7:30 pm in Gartner Auditorium — An Evening with Bombino

I first heard of him when he played Beachland Ballroom I believe back in 2016. So when they reached out to me, booking him was too good to pass up. He is the first, and I believe the only, Grammy-nominated musician from Niger. He's part of the genre of Tuareg rock, or desert rock is how some people refer to it. There's been a lot of political conflict in Niger, and those conflicts have shaped who he is. And I think he's used music as a way to advocate for his home country.

He released a new record — *Sahel* — on September 15, so this will be part of his album release tour.

Wednesday, October 25 at 7:30 pm in Gartner Auditorium — Le Poème Harmonique

There's such a rich history of historical performance in Cleveland and it will continue to be a part of CMA's programming. And besides Le Poème Harmonique's reputation, they're from Rouen, France which is the sister city of Cleveland — I think the whole concept of sister cities is kind of fascinating.

Also, the Museum has a Degas exhibition that will be up at the time of this performance. And although it's from a different time period, I thought it would be nice to have a group from France perform at the Museum while we are showcasing a French artist.

The Museum has a collection of keyboard instruments which not a whole lot of people know about. So one of our Italian harpsichords will be making a rare appearance during the concert — but hopefully not as rare moving forward.



Wednesday, November 1 at 7:30 pm in Gartner Auditorium — Omara Portuondo, as part of her Farewell World Tour

There is a story with this. As I mentioned, my first task was to book “Solstice,” so I was looking at festival and venue calendars and saw that Omara was going to be playing in Rochester in June 2023. So, I reached out to her team to see if she could perform at “Solstice.” That did not work out but they proposed coming in November. And I said, “Yeah, absolutely.”

I think Gartner will serve her well because the acoustics of the room are great. She'll be performing with a quartet — drummer, percussionist, piano, and bass — but it will be very much her show.

The concert is just a few days after her 93rd birthday. She has performed in Cleveland but doesn't come very often. I think that most people know her from Buena Vista Social Club, but she had such a career long before that.

Wednesday, November 8 at 7:30 pm in Gartner Auditorium — Freedom First: Keith LaMar and Albert Marquès

Cleveland-born poet, writer, and activist [Keith LaMar](#) tours Europe, the U.S., and Chile performing his debut album, Freedom First, but does so from his cell at the Ohio State Penitentiary, where he has spent 30 years in solitary confinement on death row for a crime he testifies that he did not commit.

I saw the show last spring when it was presented at the Bop Stop. And it was one of, if not the most powerful concert I've ever experienced. So I'm excited that it's coming to CMA.

Keith grew up right around the corner from the Cleveland Museum of Art. And he is now serving time on death row — he's the only death row inmate to ever produce an album.

The way the show works is that he calls in from prison and performs essentially spoken word over a live band performing on stage. Because we have such a huge screen, we're going to try to have him on-screen during the performance. So we're working on those details. But our hope is that he'll be able to see us and we'll be able to see him. The show really just speaks to the human experience.

Friday, December 8 at 7:30 pm in Gartner Auditorium — Accent



There's a tradition of presenting vocal ensembles at the Museum, although most have been historical performance groups like Tallis Scholars or Trio Medieval. So I wanted to present a group that has a different style. And the bass, Evan Sanders, is originally from Cleveland so the show also supports a Clevelander who currently doesn't live here, but has gone on to have a

successful career. And we're inviting him back home to perform.

I also have a personal connection to the group. They were supposed to play at Bop Stop, and they show up and are excited to sing. And I'm like — guess what — we don't have power. So I moved the show next door to SPACES, and we did pull off this kind of Hail Mary performance. They were so generous and thankful that we could even pull that off and I vowed to have them back. So I'm partially making up for the nightmare we had years ago.

Sunday, December 10 and 17 at 4:30 pm in Gartner Auditorium — Apollo's Fire Presents: Wassail!

Every season there's going to be a few shows that feature world-class artists that call Cleveland home. I think that as the Cleveland Museum of Art it's important for us to support our hometown musicians.

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To close our conversation, we discussed how Pollack's experience running the Bop Stop helped prepare him for this new position at CMA.

As the director of Bop Stop I was involved in every aspect of running that space. Not just booking, but promotions, fundraising, and relating to all the different audiences that interacted with the club, whether it's the performer, the guests, the community, or the board of directors. And I think that being in the weeds with all of those aspects prepared me well for the museum.

One of the things that is different, but fun for me, is that I have access to all these great pieces of art. And having the art inform the music is a fun exercise as someone who programs the space.

I will say that the ability to connect with people from all backgrounds is what I love about Bop Stop, and it's what I love about this job. So I'm really hoping that when people look at the season it will be diverse enough that there's at least one show that speaks to them.

One of my goals is to have people think of the Museum as a destination for performing arts — it's a Friday night, let's see what's happening at CMA.

Click [here](#) for more information and tickets.

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