

The Cleveland Orchestra MLK Celebration Concert: a conversation with violinist Amaryn Olmeda

by Mike Telin



It's always fun to ask someone how it feels to be making their debut performance with The Cleveland Orchestra. And while all the responses come with excitement, there was a bit of extra enthusiasm in the voice of Amaryn Olmeda.

“I can't wait,” the 15-year-old violinist said during a recent interview. “It's just so crazy to me because I grew up listening to all their recordings — putting them on my playlist and playing along with them. Then all of a sudden I'm performing with them. So I'm very excited for this opportunity and I'm very honored that they chose me to play with them at their Martin Luther King concert.”

On Sunday, January 14 at 7:00 pm at Severance Music Center, Daniel Reith and William Henry Caldwell will lead The Cleveland Orchestra and The Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration Chorus in a program that commemorates 60 years since the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited discrimination based on race, religion, sex, or national origin. The concert will feature works by J. Rosamond Johnson, Adolphus Hailstork, Jame P. Johnson, and the Orchestra's Daniel R. Lewis Composer Fellow, Allison Loggins-Hull. Click [here](#) for free tickets.

The program will also include Maurice Ravel's *Tzigane* with soloist Amaryn Olmeda, winner of first prize and the audience choice award at the 24th Annual Sphinx Competition. I reached the violinist by phone and began by asking her how she came to choose the piece.

Amaryn Olmeda: They reached out and asked me about playing it, and I was like, absolutely. It's one of my favorite pieces to perform because there's so much room for expressiveness. And the opening pages are all a cadenza. It's just smiling, and it gives me so much freedom. It's based on Romani Hungarian folk tunes so it's very dance-like, especially in the main theme when the orchestra joins. It's just a party all the way to the end.

I think of it as an expressive piece because he originally wrote it for violin and piano, but the piano had an attachment that they used to give it different tone colors. [*Patented in 1919, the luthéal was a piano attachment with tone and color registrations, one of which produced a cimbalom-like sound.*] It was really interesting to me because it's also my job to bring those colors out in the violin throughout the whole piece. So that's why I enjoy the piece so much.

Mike Telin: Congratulations on the Sphinx Competition. How has winning that advanced your career?

AO: First of all, it was an incredible experience — I think that they're a wonderful organization. And they gave me a lot of performance opportunities. I got to perform with the Richmond Symphony, Philadelphia Orchestra, and Buffalo.

I was also invited to perform at Carnegie Hall for their gala, and that opportunity really solidified my decision to be a professional violinist. It inspired me to work hard every day to do as well as I possibly can and get opportunities like this one in Cleveland. So they really helped me advance my career in that way.

MT: Since we're on the topic of your Carnegie Hall performance, I really loved the piece by Carlos Simon that you played. Did you know his music before you started learning this piece?

AO: I didn't. [*Between Worlds*](#) was the first piece I knew of his. Sphinx actually reached out to me when they asked me to do the gala and a few other concerts on their tour and asked me to play it. So I learned it, and then after that, I definitely dug deeper and explored more of his music. He's an amazing composer.

MT: It must have been something to walk out and see that huge crowd and be the only person on the stage.

AO: It was pretty incredible. I think the main thing about the hall is that you can hear yourself the way that the audience hears you. And so to have that connection with them and feel all the energy in the crowd — I can't even explain it. It was something really special and I enjoyed every minute of it.

MT: When did you decide you wanted to be a musician?

AO: I started playing the violin when I was almost four. My older brother played violin and I would go to all of his lessons. He was in a Suzuki program and apparently I was very quiet during all his lessons, but I was always listening. When I was really young, listening to music is how I learned it — I could listen to something and then I could play it. So after he switched to the cello I was like, I really want to play violin because I want to play all his pieces.

But I don't think there was ever a point when I decided, okay, I'm going to be a musician. I just always enjoyed it, and I think it's something I always knew I wanted to do. I enjoyed the process of discovering new colors and just exploring my time with the instrument.

MT: I read that you won your first concerto competition when you were nine?

AO: That was my first time playing with an orchestra onstage, and I thought wow, I want to do it again.

MT: You're playing with quite a few orchestras this season. I couldn't help but notice that you have three performances of the Barber Concerto coming up — is that a new acquisition to your repertoire?

AO: I've been working on it for a while, but these will be my first concerts performing it. I'm very excited because I'm playing it in Oakland, Des Moines, and then Chicago, so three in a row. I'm very much looking forward to exploring it with orchestra, because there are no other pieces like it.

MT: You're studying with Miriam Fried at New England Conservatory.

AO: Yes, I'm still in the pre-college and she doesn't teach any other pre-college students. So, I was happy to have her accept me as a student.

MT: I understand that you also compose or you have taken composition lessons, and you paint.

AO: Yes, I love all art forms. I just composed cadenzas for Mozart's Concertos Nos. 3 and 5, and for my composition classes I've written a few short pieces. It's definitely something that I want to continue to do — writing cadenzas and maybe even bigger pieces. It's not easy, but I do enjoy it.

And yes, I also paint. I love watercolor and oil painting, and I actually just finished a pottery class.

MT: Oh my!

AO: Yeah, I learned how to do pottery at the wheel. I do all kinds of artsy things. Another thing I really enjoy is fashion — I'm in a fashion class at the Boston Institute of Fashion Design.

MT: I need to ask you about your farm.

AO: Well, we just moved to Boston so we just left the farm. But yes, I did grow up on a little hobby farm, five acres. We had goats and chickens, a garden, and fruit trees. So it was a nice way to live life.

MT: It sounds beautiful. And thanks for taking the time to talk — is there anything else you'd like to tell me?

AO: Just that I am very honored that The Cleveland Orchestra chose me, and I'm excited for this performance.

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