

Conductor David Afkham to make Severance Music Center debut

by Mike Telin



“I am looking forward to being back in Cleveland,” conductor David Afkham said over Zoom from his home in Germany. “This will be my third time with the Orchestra — the first two were at Blossom Music Center, so I’m excited to lead one of the world’s greatest orchestras in that wonderful hall.”

On Friday, April 26 at 7:30 pm, Afkham will make his Severance Music Center debut with a concert that features Unsuk Chin’s *subito con forza*, Rachmaninoff’s *Piano Concerto No. 2* with Beatrice Rana, and Bartók’s

Concerto for Orchestra. The program will be repeated on Saturday at 8:00 pm and Sunday at 3:00 pm. Tickets are available [online](#).

Regarding this week’s concerts, Afkham, who serves as Chief Conductor and Artistic Director of the Orquesta y Coro Nacional de España, said, “When I was asked to fill in for my friend Lahav Shani back in March, I looked at the program and thought — I like it a lot, I don’t want to change a thing.”

Afkham, who conducted the U.S. premiere of Unsuk Chin’s *Subito con forza* (“Suddenly with power”) with the Minnesota Orchestra, described it as a fun piece that has a lot to say in its five minutes. “It was written in 2020 for the 250th anniversary of Beethoven’s birth.”

He noted that both the Rachmaninoff and the Bartók are monumental works that were written when the composers were experiencing difficult times in their lives.

“Rachmaninoff was suffering depression and writer’s block after the disastrous premiere of his First Symphony. But after help from the neurologist Nikolai Dahl he did regain his confidence. And Bartók, who had left Hungary and was living in the United States, was out of work and in the hospital with what we now know was leukemia when Koussevitzky asked him to write a piece in memory of his wife Natalie, who had died in 1942.”

Afkham said that like all monumental works, these two pieces are full of memorable moments, noting the many attractive melodies of the piano concerto and the inventiveness of the *Concerto for Orchestra*.

“The second movement of the Bartók — ‘Game of Pairs’ — highlights every instrument in the wind section of the orchestra. The fourth movement quotes Lehár and the invasion theme of Shostakovich’s *Symphony No. 7*. And the final movement is a wonderful perpetual motion.”

Afkham also looks forward to collaborating with this week’s soloist, Beatrice Rana. “This will be our first time together but I’ve heard many great things about her and I very much look forward to working with her.”

Returning to the topic of stepping in for Lahav Shani so that he could be at home for the birth of his first child, Afkham said that he was more than happy to do it. “I know what that’s like. I had to withdraw from a Chicago Symphony concert so I could be at home for the birth of my son.”

In any profession one has to juggle career with home — how does he maintain a balanced life?

“I’m a conductor, my wife is an opera singer, and we have children, so we have many calendars. One for my schedule, one for hers, and one for the children. But many times people forget about a fourth — and it’s very important — a personal calendar for me and my wife.”

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