

Brandon Ridenour returns to ChamberFest Cleveland

by Mike Telin



This week, trumpeter Brandon Ridenour will be featured in three ChamberFest Cleveland programs both as a performer and arranger.

Ridenour's journey to becoming a trumpet soloist, collaborative artist, composer, and arranger began at age 5, when he started studying piano with his father. After picking up the trumpet in 5th grade band class in Grand

Rapids, Michigan, Ridenour went on to study at the Juilliard School. After graduating he became the youngest member to join the Canadian Brass and eventually embarked on a solo career.

In 2014 Ridenour became the first trumpeter in 30 years to win the Concert Artist Guild competition. In his role as performer-composer, he helped to launch the Brooklyn-based ensemble Founders, and in 2023, he joined the American Brass Quintet. As an educator, he serves on the faculties at Juilliard, The New School and the Manhattan School of Music, where he is passionate about developing a new model of education for a well-rounded, progressive musician of the future.

I caught up with him by telephone and began the conversation by welcoming him back to the Festival.

Brandon Ridenour: Thanks. It's always a great collection of excellent players, and I'm looking forward to working with my ChamberFest friends.

Mike Telin: You're playing some interesting repertoire this year.

BR: Yes, it's a wide sphere of styles along with some arrangements of mine.

MT: Tell me about Heinz Karl Gruber's 3 MOB Pieces (Thursday, June 20).

BR: Gruber is brand-new to me, so my knowledge about him is limited. What I can tell you is that he and his counterparts are called the third Viennese School. This particular piece is for a flexible instrumentation of seven instruments, meaning that I'm on part number three, which could easily be played by the clarinet if I moved to another part.

I first knew it in an arrangement that Gruber did for solo trumpet and chamber orchestra. I saw videos online of some great trumpet players playing it and I was a little worried that ChamberFest had programmed that version because it's rather challenging for the trumpet. I was relieved to learn that we would be playing the flexible instrumentation version.

MT: Martinu's La revue de cuisine is also on the program.

BR: It's a fun piece that I've played a few times, the last was with Roman Rabinovich as the pianist.

MT: Then you have Bach's cantata Jauchzet Gott in allen Landen, BWV 51 with soprano Susanna Phillips (Friday, June 21).

BR: Yes. Many people think of it as a duet between the soprano and trumpet and I think that's because trumpet players don't get solos quite as often as some other instruments. But in my mind, I think the soprano is the soloist and the trumpet is the accompaniment.

MT: The Saturday program includes some of your arrangements of Beatles songs, but let's start with Saint-Saëns' Septet for piano, trumpet, two violins, viola, cello, and bass.

BR: I've played it a handful of times and I enjoy playing it because it's not often that a great composer like Saint-Saëns has written something for the trumpet.

I would say that this piece doesn't feature the trumpet in the same way that other pieces on the program do, because whenever a trumpet is part of a small ensemble, it just kind of sticks out — because it's a trumpet. So the challenge is to blend in with the string sound. It's not a virtuosic trumpet part, but it's a nice piece that I think should be programmed more often.

MT: On to the Beatles tunes. I was listening to your album Come Together and I enjoyed your arrangements because they are real arrangements not just covers.

BR: Thanks but I definitely went off the deep end there. In 2018 I started really digging into the expansive catalog of Beatles songs, and the hardest part was choosing which ones would go on the album.

The ones that we're playing at ChamberFest — *Blackbird* and *Eleanor Rigby* — are both Paul McCartney songs. *Eleanor Rigby* was actually one of my first arrangements and it got me into the whole idea of exploring creative arranging, where you take a familiar melody and twist it all around and figure out what other musical styles could be used in the arrangement.

In the case of *Eleanor Rigby*, I took the perspective of Eleanore's revenge. It's rather angry-sounding, but also kind of minimalist with a drive to it.

I did that arrangement when I was a student at Juilliard — I was probably around 18 or 19 — and I thought, this is pretty fun, and it was well received. I was encouraged to do more, so I did.

MT: Did I read correctly that you got some of your inspiration from Roy Hargrove?

BR: Yes. The arrangement of *All You Need Is Love* was inspired by how he plays the trumpet and flugelhorn. At the time I was listening to a lot of Roy Hargrove, and he was definitely an influence on me as a player.

MT: Tell me about the Founders — now that's a very interesting group.

BR: We like to say that we met online, as many people do these days. But It started out as a musical songwriting collective. There were both songwriters and instrumental writers, and the rule was that you had to post a song that you wrote once every two weeks on our Soundcloud. And if you failed to post anything, you got a strike. Three strikes and you're out of the club. I got three strikes many years ago so I'm not in the club anymore. But while I was in it, I met some other great musicians and writers who are still friends of mine today.

That's how it started. Then we decided to put on a concert, and then that was fun, so we put on another, and so on. The group has really evolved over the years. Even the instrumentation has been flexible. It's not a normal classical chamber ensemble, but this isn't really a classical group — it's kind of a hybrid band. Everybody in the group is a writer and or arranger. Sometimes there are singers who can play piano and guitar and who are also familiar with electronics in addition to writing music. So it's a fun group.

MT: And the name, how did that come about?

BR: That's a good question. Founders, are you familiar with Founders Brewery?

MT: Oh, yes.

BR: That happens to be in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where I grew up. It was just a fun name based on a brewery that happened to be from where I grew up.

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