

Conductor Brett Mitchell returns to Blossom Music Center

by Mike Telin



“To say that once again being asked to conduct The Cleveland Orchestra at Blossom is an honor would be a gross understatement,” Brett Mitchell said during a telephone interview. “I am not often at a loss for words, but there really aren’t any to describe how much it means to me.”

On Saturday, July 6 at 7:00 pm Mitchell will return to the Blossom podium to lead The Orchestra in Leonard Bernstein’s Three Dance Episodes from *On the Town*, William Grant Still’s *Symphony No. 1*, “Afro-American,” and Samuel Barber’s Overture to *The School for Scandal*. The program also includes George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* in Béla Fleck’s transcription for banjo and orchestra

with Fleck as soloist. Tickets are available [online](#).

Mitchell said he loves *Rhapsody in Blue*. But when the Orchestra told him that they didn’t want the symphonic version that is often played by orchestras he thought they might be considering the original Paul Whiteman jazz band version. “It turned out that what they wanted was Béla Fleck’s transcription where he plays the piano part on the banjo.”

The conductor said that he’s delighted to have the work on the program and to once again work with Fleck. “It’s wonderful because during my first season with the Colorado Symphony, Béla came and we did his third banjo concerto. So he and I have worked together before — and we hit it off. He’s an amazing musician. It’s funny, because he’s won all these Grammys and the Grammys operate by categorizing folks. Yet Béla has made a name for himself by thinking outside the box — or by not even acknowledging the box, just by loving great music and approaching it in the way that only he can.”

Mitchell also thinks that transcribing a piano work for the banjo rather than a single line instrument such as the clarinet or cello makes a lot of sense. “A cello can play chords here and there, but it is not percussive in the way that the piano is. The attack of a piano note can be quite direct, and no instrument does direct better than a banjo. It’s because of the twang of the banjo — the sound it makes when it’s strummed, or when it’s plucked, or when it’s picked — can cut through just about anything. So I think it’s going to be a total trip and I’m just tickled that the audience is going to get to hear it.”

The conductor noted that Willam Grant Still’s *Symphony No. 1* is a piece that has been on his wish list for over a decade. “So when the Orchestra asked if I would be interested, both of my hands immediately shot up.”

Mitchell pointed out that while 2024 is the 100th anniversary of *Rhapsody in Blue* it is also the 80th anniversary of Leonard Bernstein’s *On the Town*.

“The show opened in 1944, and I think it’s really interesting to hear what jazz on Broadway sounded like in 1924 with Gershwin, and in 1944 with Bernstein. 20 years doesn’t seem like that long a time, but when you listen to both pieces you’d think they were written 50 years apart. The musical growth during the jazz age and the depression, and once the Second World War started the Swing era really took hold with Glenn Miller and the Dorsey brothers — the change is just extraordinary.”

Samuel Barber’s Overture to *The School for Scandal* was written in 1931 and was the composer’s first work for full orchestra. “Barber lived from 1910 -1981, which means he was 21 years old when he wrote it, which is just astonishing — he was still studying at Curtis. He wrote it during the summer in Italy, and when he returned to Curtis, he tried to have the piece read by the school orchestra, but the director at the time was none other than Fritz Reiner who said, thanks, but no thanks.”

The work was premiered two years later by the Philadelphia Orchestra under the direction of Alexander Smallens. “I think it’s ironic when your university orchestra won’t even read your piece, and two years later it’s on a concert program by the Philadelphia Orchestra.”

Saturday’s concert will also be a homecoming for Mitchell, who served on the conducting staff from 2013 to 2017, first as Assistant Conductor then as Associate Conductor. He was Music Director of the Colorado Symphony from 2017 to 2021. In March Mitchell was named Music Director of the Pasadena Symphony, and the Sunriver Music Festival has extended his contract as Artistic Director & Conductor through the 2028 summer season. Still there is a special place in his heart for Cleveland.

“I conducted The Cleveland Orchestra Holiday Concerts last year and I think a third of the way through was my 158th performance with that amazing orchestra — which just blows my mind. And the fact that they’ve asked me to return to Blossom is a thrill, and I’m deeply grateful for the opportunity.”

Photo by Roger Mastroianni.

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