

Soprano Véronique Gens brings love of French music to Cleveland debut

by Stephanie Manning



Véronique Gens feels a special connection to Hector Berlioz's *Les Nuits d'été*, a piece she's performed for decades all around the world. But the 30-minute song cycle isn't an easy one, both in length and in character.

"It's a difficult cycle for your mind and for your soul, because the text is so sad and so depressive," the soprano said in a recent interview. "But it's a beautiful cycle."

I reached Gens by phone in France, while she was preparing for her final performance at this year's Festival d'Aix-en-Provence. While the piece may not be very upbeat, Gens sounded very excited to make her debut with The Cleveland Orchestra. She will join them at Blossom Music Center on Saturday, July 20 at 7:00 p.m. Tickets are available [online](#).

"I'm so honored that I've been asked to come and sing with this beautiful orchestra," she said, adding that she used to listen to recordings of the ensemble growing up. "Really, I can't wait."

Gens has been to the U.S. before as a young singer, with William Christie's Les Arts Florissants. But Saturday's performance will give her a new American experience in a solo role. *Les Nuits d'été* is a natural choice for her Cleveland debut, given that the soprano is a well-known champion of French Romantic music.

"As a French singer, you know, I have my little flag," she said, laughing gently. "I feel so proud that I'm invited to Cleveland to sing French music in the French language and by a French composer. So it's a big chance and a big challenge at the same time."

Berlioz's 1840s song cycle, set to poems written by his friend Théophile Gautier, deals with different stages of love, from the sweet to the mournful. "These six songs, it's quite a long cycle for the singer," Gens said. "The first one and the last one are quite optimistic, but the four in the center are so depressive, and so sad, and so hopeless."

Despite the composer's association with huge, bombastic orchestrations like his *Symphonie Fantastique*, this work is more easily equated to chamber music. "The orchestra is much smaller and it feels like French art song, really — but not with a piano, with an orchestra," Gens said. "It's always very subtle and very precise."

She noted that the unified nature of the vocal and orchestral parts can also pose a challenge. "It's also very difficult for the orchestra because we are always together — everybody has to listen to each other, and the conductor is there to kind of make the relationship between us."

The person on the podium for Saturday will be Antonello Manacorda, who Gens is excited to sing with again. The two met back when Manacorda was concertmaster of the Mahler Chamber Orchestra, before the growth of his conducting career.

"He understands singers so well, and I feel so secure when I'm singing *Les Nuits d'été* with him," she said.

Singing with an orchestra, she added, is also a refreshing change of pace from an opera setting. "When you're singing an opera, the orchestra is in the pit — you can't see them and they can't see you. But when we have the chance to make these kinds of concerts, we are on the same level. The orchestra, and me, and the conductor — we can see each other, we can breathe together, and we can just make music together."

This concert will also be Manacorda's debut with The Cleveland Orchestra, and Gens said she is "very happy" the two are marking that milestone together.

"I feel so confident with him there. Nothing can go wrong. It's going to be only pleasure."

Published on ClevelandClassical.com July 16, 2024.

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