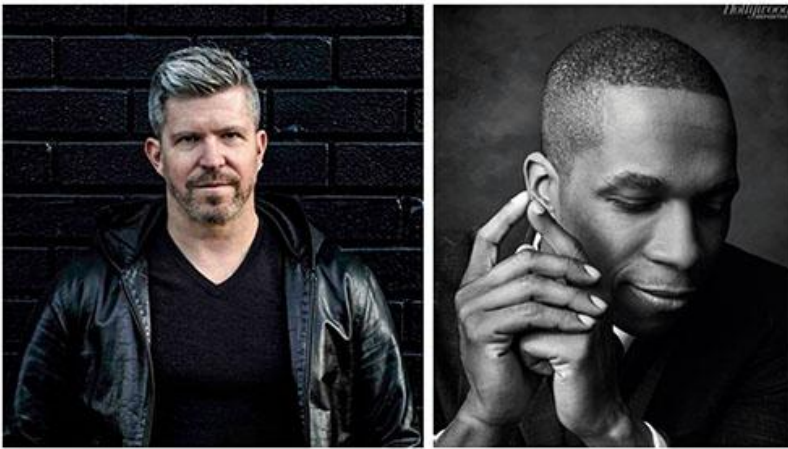


Cleveland Orchestra at Blossom: A conversation with Edwin Outwater

by Mike Telin



“When you stand in front of a great orchestra like Cleveland as a conductor, you kind of pinch yourself,” Edwin Outwater said in a recent Zoom conversation. “To be that close and to see how they do what they do is a great honor — and a lot of fun.”

On Sunday, July 21 at 7:00 p.m., Outwater will return to the Blossom Music Center podium

to lead The Cleveland Orchestra in “An Evening with Leslie Odom, Jr.,” featuring the Tony and Grammy award-winning vocalist, songwriter, author, and actor who created the role of Aaron Burr in the Broadway musical *Hamilton*. Tickets are available [online](#).

I began our conversation by asking Outwater what the audience should expect to hear on Sunday.

Edwin Outwater: Just looking at the set list, which I don't want to give away, I think it's a really good mix of standards, Broadway, and R&B. Everything from songs like *Smile*, to standards like *Autumn Leaves*. It's a really fun set with lots of surprises. And I think it will show what an amazing and versatile performing artist and singer he is. There will also be a number of new songs and arrangements. And yes, there will be some *Hamilton*.

Mike Telin: Have you worked with Odom before?

EO: No, this is the first time and I'm super excited. I love working with theater artists, and I've worked with some of the best, from George Hearn and Brian Stokes Mitchell to Sutton Foster and Jessica Vosk. What I love about this kind of singing is how they deliver the words, as opposed to opera singing, which is harder because there's so much

emphasis on sound production. But there's a kind of wittiness and sharpness to Broadway singing that I really like.

MT: How much rehearsal time will you have?

EO: Of course I'll meet with Leslie before, but I think it's going to be one mega rehearsal, which is pretty standard. It's a credit to how good these orchestras are. The Olympics are coming up, and orchestras like Cleveland are the Olympic athletes of music. Their skill level and speed of not only playing the notes, but understanding and playing them expressively is astonishing.

I've been doing this for many years, and I'm still in awe. Cleveland takes everything so seriously, and there's a culture here of the players supporting each other and playing their absolute best. I can't wait to be back with them.

MT: I see that in addition to working with Leslie Odom, you also have upcoming performances with Beck, Ben Folds, and Carlos Simon with his show "Coltrane Legacy." And you're working again with Stuart Copeland and his show "The Police Dearanged for Orchestra."

EO: I work with Stuart a lot. I helped him record the album and launch the show. I've worked with two out of three of The Police — so I almost won Police bingo. Guitarist Andy Summers is the last one remaining.

MT: It seems like classical music is a lot more open to outside influences than it used to be.

EO: I think there's always been a dichotomy between classical music and pop since the post-war period, when people like Fritz Kreisler and great opera stars would be performing popular tunes on TV.

And recently Anne-Sophie Mutter recorded — I know because I was there assisting — a bunch of John Williams tunes and movie soundtracks that he arranged for solo violin. I was like, 'Oh, we're back to the Kreisler days of playing these things, and I think it's nice that this is happening.'

I do think in the last ten to twenty years there's been a more concerted effort to make the orchestra less of a backup band, giving them more to do and more to interact with. I think that's essential for the success of these projects.

MT: How did you find yourself going in this direction?

EO: I think it's just part of what I do. I conducted Mozart's "Jupiter" Symphony last week. I've been the resident conductor of the San Francisco Symphony, music director of the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony, and I'm music director of the San Francisco Conservatory, I'm also a principal guest conductor of the BBC Concert Orchestra — that was just announced. So there's still a bunch of classical music on my plate.

I grew up around a lot of rock and jazz music before I became interested in classical music. I grew up in L.A. My grandmother worked for Ella Fitzgerald for 40 years and was Norman Grant's secretary of records. And my father worked for Warner Records, so I was surrounded by a lot of amazing live music. By the time I was 14, I was deep into Zappa and crazy stuff and had heard every David Bowie album and most of the bebop stuff already.

My parents liked classical music. They didn't know much about it, but they wanted me to. Through the public schools in Santa Monica, which also produced Michael Sachs, Cleveland's principal trumpet, and the conductor David Robertson, classical music hit me like a lightning bolt. I stopped listening to all other kinds of music and voraciously consumed classical music and started playing bass. Once I'd established myself as a classical conductor, I was hired by Michael Tillson Thomas at the San Francisco Symphony.

And as these projects started to come up, pop artists trying to create a show with orchestra, it turned out that I was somehow a bridge between these two different genres. I was so comfortable with rock musicians and jazz musicians, even though I am not a rock musician or a jazz musician. I'm purely a classical musician. I don't improvise. I fool around on electric bass, but compared to those people, I have no skills at that. But I seem to make the pop artists comfortable and the orchestras comfortable.

And it's fun, you know, expanding the scope of these projects, and working with some of my childhood idols. I think if the singer is great, if the performer is great, if the songwriting is great, if the arrangers are great, orchestras appreciate that.

But let's not forget that orchestras live and breathe classical music — that's what they were trained to do. That's what I was trained to do. So I think it's great that they're expanding their scope, but not replacing the great traditional work that orchestras do.

For myself, I feel like I have a good, balanced diet.

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