

## James Ehnes courts jet lag to play Korngold Concerto at Severance

by Mike Telin



When Canadian violinist James Ehnes got a call from his management telling him that The Cleveland Orchestra was interested in inviting him to play a concerto in July, his first reaction was “That’s impossible. I’m in Seattle in July.”

Then he thought again. “The Cleveland Orchestra is, for me, one of the most inspiring orchestras in the world, and any chance to work with them is something I’m going to jump at.”

On Thursday, July 25 at 7 pm, Ehnes will join the Cleveland Orchestra for a Summers at Severance concert led by Petr Popelka.

The violinist will be featured in Erich Wolfgang Korngold’s Concerto, on a program that includes César Franck’s *Le Chasseur*

*maudit* and Antonín Dvořák’s *Symphony No. 6*. Tickets are available [online](#).

Korngold, born in 1897, was an Austrian composer and conductor who fled Europe in the mid-1930s and later adopted U.S. nationality. A noted pianist and composer of classical music, he was the first composer of international stature to write Hollywood film scores.

I reached James Ehnes by telephone to ask about his scheduling dilemma and his choice of the Korngold.

*Mike Telin: You’re at the Seattle Chamber Music Society Summer Festival.*

JE: That's correct. This is the 30th consecutive July that I've spent time in Seattle at the Festival. I've been artistic director since 2012, but I went for many years before that as a player, so it really is my summer home away from home.

*MT: I'm curious to know why you're coming into Cleveland for this single gig?*

JE: The answer should be self-evident — it's The Cleveland Orchestra!

*MT: But I understand that your travel schedule is going to be a little tight.*

JE: Our schedule for the main part of the festival includes concerts on Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday. But it feels weird to end the festival on a Thursday. So for our final week, we're doing Sunday, Tuesday, and Friday.

When the Cleveland date came up, I took a second look and, you know what? I could actually play a Tuesday concert in Seattle, then fly to Cleveland to play the Thursday concert there, then fly back to Seattle for the closing concert on Friday.

It's a little bit crazy, but as I said, it *is* The Cleveland Orchestra.

*MT: The Korngold is a piece you know very well. I was curious about why people love this concerto so much?*

JE: It's a beautiful piece and it has all the elements you'd want. It's very lush — in person even more than on a recording. It's stunningly colorful, and the orchestration is spectacular. It has lots and lots of virtuoso fireworks and everyone likes a good show, so that's certainly a part of it.

It's not just a vehicle for the soloist, it's also a real opportunity for the orchestra to shine. So you really have everything you would want. It's exciting, it's beautiful, it shows off the violin to great advantage. It's challenging, but very effective.

*MT: Every time I hear it I find it to be comforting.*

JE: The lushness is very enveloping, and it's also a very optimistic piece. I think it makes people feel good.

*MT: When did you first come in contact with the Korngold?*

JE: It was a big favorite of my teacher, so I probably started learning it when I was in high school. Maybe because it was just a piece that he really enjoyed. Korngold was a

film composer, and in fact, I learned it off a copy of my teacher's solo part that had the various films from which the themes are taken written in, so you can see where these little bits of music came from.

It was probably around 1998 that I gave my first performance of it. It's a piece that I've played from time to time, and I've always enjoyed it. I ended up recording it for the first time in 2005 with Bramwell Tovey and the Vancouver Symphony. That recording won a Grammy, so it got a lot of attention, and then people just started asking me to play the concerto.

*MT: Do you like his other music? I know so little about the other classical pieces that he composed.*

JE: It's a treasure trove. Some of the early chamber works are just the most exquisite, amazing music. There's a string sextet, a piano quintet, there's a suite for the unusual combination of left hand piano, two violins and cello which is an incredible piece. Some of his operas, *Die tote Stadt* in particular, are full of stunning music.

A lot of people's knowledge of Korngold comes from the film scores. I'm not really an old movie guy, so I know his music mainly from his concert works. His violin concerto splits the difference — it's written for the concert hall, but much of the material is taken from his film work.

*MT: Have you worked with Petr Popelka before?*

JE: No, it's going to be our first time meeting. We have a number of mutual friends and I've heard nothing but the best things, so I'm really looking forward to it.

*MT: Final question. I know you're a baseball fan — have you had a chance to get to many games?*

JE: I went to a game in Toronto, one in Tampa, and one in Miami. I actually went to a game in Seattle where the Mariners played the Blue Jays and I got to play both national anthems. That's become sort of a tradition for us out here with the Chamber Music Festival, and it's a ton of fun.

I haven't seen the Guardians since the name change. I don't know if they're at home this week, but I think I'm going to be a little busy. They're not my team, but I've always had sort of a soft spot for them. And one of my best friends is Steve Rose, the Orchestra's principal second violin. He's a big fan, and for his sake I want to see the Guardians do well.

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