

Cleveland Orchestra: a conversation with violin soloist Frank Peter Zimmermann

by Mike Telin



After a six-year absence, violinist Frank Peter Zimmermann will return to the Severance Music Center stage on Thursday, September 19 to play Robert Schumann's concerto with Franz Welser-Möst and The Cleveland Orchestra in the first performance of the new season. The program will be repeated on Sunday the 22nd at 3:00 pm.

"I'm extremely happy to be returning to Cleveland. It's my favorite orchestra in the States and maybe the world, and the public is also special," the violinist said in a telephone

conversation from his home in Germany. "I have a long relationship with them — I think my first concerts were in 1987 with Christoph von Dohnányi — and I have many friends there. So it's going to be a joy to come back for the season opener."

The Schumann concerto is a musically complicated piece with an intriguing history. He wrote it very late in his career for Joseph Joachim, and although the violinist was in possession of the manuscript for the rest of his life, he never performed the Concerto. It finally received its premiere by George Kulenkampff and the Berlin Philharmonic on 26 November 1937.

"I think in general the Concerto shows that Schumann was in a tough time," Zimmermann said. "He had just lost his position as music director in Dusseldorf, and he probably felt that he would become sick very soon. There was the unsolvable problem with Clara, who wanted to be a great pianist playing all over the world, and they had six children at that time.

“I read in a book that during his last years when he was at the dinner table with his kids and Clara, he would just stare at the ceiling and quietly whistle. So his mind was somewhere else.”

Zimmermann said the big blocks of tutti passages at the beginning, the middle, and toward the end of the first movement represent the society around Schumann, and the solo part, with its completely different mood, represents himself.

He described the second movement as an outcry about the love the composer always wanted to have. “It’s this kind of German romanticism — it’s so close but at the same time he will never achieve it. And the last movement is strange. If you play it exactly with the metronome it’s absolutely boring. But if you don’t, it becomes a technical nightmare — there are just too many notes. Nobody can play it. So you have to find a good solution.”

Unlike the Mendelssohn, which Zimmermann called the perfect violin concerto, the Schumann is full of weaknesses. “It has these moments where you feel like you’re falling into space. It’s scary, and also overwhelming because you keep falling but you never hit the ground.”

The violinist said that he waited a long time to learn the piece. “I think I was 27 when I first played it. It’s not like the Beethoven, Mendelssohn, or Brahms that you play as a teenager. It needs a certain kind of experience with other pieces before you tackle it. I have had some blocks of playing it during sort of a Schumann maniacal period. But you do have to put it aside, it’s not healthy to play it too much.”

Even so, Zimmermann will be performing the Concerto twice in Bergen, Norway before playing it here later this week. “I haven’t played the piece in a while and I want it to be in good shape for Cleveland.”

Also on this week’s programs: Sergei Prokofiev’s Symphony No. 1 (“Classical”), and Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky’s Symphony No. 6 (“Pathétique”). Tickets are available [online](#).

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