

BlueWater Chamber Orchestra begins its 15th season: a conversation with Neil Mueller

by Mike Telin



When Carlton Woods was set to retire from his post at Michigan’s Midland Symphony Orchestra in 2007, the longtime music educator and conductor, along with his wife Ladonna, set his sights on Cleveland.

Why Cleveland? “I wanted to come where I could hear the best orchestra in the country and one of the greatest in the world every week,” Woods told *The Plain Dealer* in a 2015 interview. Once here, Woods quickly recognized the wealth of professional musicians living in the area who were looking for more opportunities to perform. In a sense, Woods seized the moment, and in 2010 with the tagline “From Cleveland for Cleveland,” the BlueWater Chamber Orchestra was born.

On Saturday, October 4 at 7:30 pm at the Church of the Covenant, the BlueWater Chamber Orchestra will kick off its fifteenth anniversary with “Threads of Time, Struggle, and Hope.” Under the direction of Daniel Meyer, the program will include Rollo Dilworth’s *Freedom’s Plow*, Adolphus Hailstork’s *He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands*, André Thomas’s *I Dream a World* with the Cleveland School of the Arts Choir, David Biedenbender’s *River of Time* with trumpeter Neil Mueller as soloist, and Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 5*. The program will be repeated on Sunday at 4:00 pm at St. Noel Church in Willoughby Hills. Click [here](#) for more information.

A founding member of BlueWater, Neil Mueller — who is now principal trumpet of the Lansing Symphony and serves on the faculty at Central Michigan University — said during a recent telephone conversation that he is thrilled to be returning to Cleveland to perform with his friends.

“I loved the vision that Carlton had, and the fact that the Orchestra has been going for fifteen years is spectacular. And when I look at the roster of musicians, it’s people I know and that’s one of the great things about the Orchestra — it has a recognizable face in the community.”

The soloist said that David Biedenbender’s *River of Time* — commissioned by and written for Mueller, conductor Timothy Muffitt, and the Lansing Symphony Orchestra — does what all the great symphonic works featuring the trumpet do. “At times it’s lyrical, at times heroic, and at times over-the-top. It takes that role of an orchestral trumpet and puts it in front and center.”

Mueller said that from the first time he heard some of Biedenbender’s music, he knew he wanted him to write a piece for trumpet. And during conversation with Muffitt about Mueller playing a concerto, the conversation quickly veered to commissioning a new piece.

“David is associate professor and chair of composition at Michigan State and the Orchestra had already premiered his Trombone Concerto, which is a significant piece, several years ago. So that’s how it came about.”

While the piece was being written, soloist and composer did collaborate. “It was really wonderful to have that and I think it makes the piece more successful because it works for the trumpet.”

Is the concerto easy? “Not by any stretch,” Mueller said. “But when I’m playing a new piece, I’m happy to suffer at certain moments, and I’m happy to work hard when there’s a good payoff.”

The piece is written in three movements, each of which Mueller said have evocative titles — “Becoming,” “Flowing,” and “Crossing.” “I’m someone who is a little distrustful of artists’ statements, but the programmatic aspect of David’s writing feels like a great story. Whether you know what story inspired him or what pictures he had in his mind, in purely sonic terms, it’s just a great journey.”

Making the BlueWater performance even more fitting is that founder Carlton Woods was teaching at Central Michigan when David Biedenbender was an undergraduate. “David played the euphonium, so he wasn’t in the orchestra, but he once mentioned to me that Carlton was the first person that encouraged him as an undergraduate to write for orchestra. So David and Carlton knew each other well before I knew anything about Carlton, David, or CMU. Music is a small world.”

Published on ClevelandClassical.com October 2, 2024

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)