

The Cleveland Orchestra: A Conversation with Thomas Guggeis

By Mike Telin



“Franz Welser-Möst was one of my first big supporters,” conductor Thomas Guggeis said during a telephone conversation. “I was his assistant at the Salzburg Festival early in my career, so it’s a real honor for me to be making my American orchestral debut with his amazing orchestra.

On Friday, February 7 at 7:30 pm in Mandel Concert Hall at Severance Music Center, Guggeis will lead The Cleveland Orchestra in Richard Strauss’ *Also sprach Zarathustra*, Henri Dutilleux’s *Tout un monde lointain...*, with principal cello Mark Kosower as soloist, and Maurice Ravel’s *La valse*. The program will be repeated on Saturday at 8:00 pm and Sunday at

3:00 pm. Tickets are available [online](#).

Born in 1993 in Dachau, Bavaria, Thomas Guggeis has served as general music director of Oper Frankfurt and artistic director of the Frankfurt Museum Concerts since the 2023–24 season. He made his debut in Frankfurt in May 2021 with Mozart’s *Requiem*, followed by Richard Strauss’s *Ariadne auf Naxos*. Guggeis made his first North American appearance in 2023 at the Metropolitan Opera leading Wagner’s *Der Fliegende Holländer*. The same year he conducted the work for Santa Fe Opera.

When asked about the Cleveland program, Guggeis described it as a “fantastic playground for the orchestra that will showcase the ensemble’s many colors.”

Noting his strong relationship with the music of Richard Strauss — he stepped in on short notice to lead a performance of *Salome* at Staatsoper Berlin, where he was an

assistant to Daniel Barenboim — Guggeis said that *Zarathustra* is the “perfect piece to open the concert.”

Inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophical work of the same name, Guggeis said that the work’s famous opening fanfare titled “Sunrise” presents the big idea. “It then moves into a series of those philosophical concepts before culminating in a big dance. The entire story is beautifully told in 35 minutes.” He noted that the other pieces on the program follow a similar structure.

Henri Dutilleux’s *Tout un monde lointain... (A whole distant world...)*, is a concertante for cello and orchestra written for Mstislav Rostropovich between 1967 and 1970. The conductor said the 30-minute work that concludes with a joyous dance for the world will highlight the artistry of both Mark Kosower and the Orchestra. “As with all of Dutilleux’s music, it is well constructed — I have never heard an unnecessary note in his music.”

The program concludes with Ravel’s *La valse*. Beginning with low rumbles, the work transitions into a chain of waltzes until a huge dance brings it to a conclusion. The piece is full of nostalgia but it presents the same concept in only twelve minutes.

“I like this program very much,” Guggeis said. “It can either take you on a philosophical journey through life or you can just sit back and enjoy the music.”

Although Guggeis did not come from a musical family — his father is a brewer and his mother a tax clerk — he did study conducting and piano at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater in Munich and the Conservatorio Giuseppe Verdi in Milan. How did he find his way to opera?

“One of my very first teachers — who was an influential figure in my life — each week would assign specific sections of operas. I would always show up well prepared but because I did not come from a musical background I knew very little about opera. So after the first few lessons I had to tell him I didn’t know any of these sections. I saw that made him so sad that I decided to keep going and after a couple more lessons I started consuming operas — I was hooked.”

Guggeis began his professional career as a répétiteur at the Staatsoper Berlin, which he said was a wonderful experience. “I did that for nearly three years. And when you prepare a singer, those operas go deep into your stomach.”

Along the way he also received a bachelor’s degree in quantum mechanics. “I enjoy looking behind the walls and understanding the concepts that govern the world.”

Photo by Simon Pauly

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