

Cleveland Women's Orchestra: Chatting with conductor Eric Benjamin



On Sunday afternoon, March 30 at 3:30, the Cleveland Women's Orchestra will continue its long tradition of performing in Severance Hall. The ensemble's 90th Anniversary Concert in what is now known as the Mandel Concert Hall at Severance Music Center will be conducted by music director Eric Benjamin. Tickets are available [online](#).

The main work on the program will feature violinist Olga Dubossarskaya Kaler, cellist Eleanor Pompa, and pianist Emanuela Friscioni, in Ludwig van Beethoven's *Triple Concerto*.

Benjamin was named the fourth music director of the oldest women's orchestra in the U.S. in 2023, following the lengthy tenures of its founder Hyman Schandler and his successor Robert L. Cronquist, who held the podium for 33 and 22 years respectively. During COVID, John Thomas Dodson served as interim music director for 3-½ years, passing the baton to Jungho Kim for a single season.

Acknowledging the irony that the Women's Orchestra has been led only by males for nine decades, Benjamin said in a telephone conversation, "I'm privileged to be the Y chromosome in the room, and I'm very pleased to affirm and support the historic role that this orchestra played as a place where women were welcome to play. Much has changed, of course, but this orchestra identifies itself as a group of women together. Being a guy, I stand outside of this and the bonding is a remarkable thing to watch. And it doesn't look like the ensemble is going to change very often or very quickly.

"Over the years, of course, they've occasionally had guys fill in for parts that were missing — when they didn't have a fourth horn or needed more violas. And the search is always on for a woman maestro. They've entertained that idea over the years, but they never quite hit a match. So I'm privileged to be the guy that gets to work with them."

Benjamin pointed out that a Severance Hall concert is part of the legacy of the Women's Orchestra, which was the first ensemble besides the Cleveland Orchestra to play in that prestigious hall. "Now, everybody's performing at Severance, but for a while the Severance Hall stage was the exclusive property of the Women's Orchestra and the Cleveland Orchestra."

I asked Eric Benjamin about the repertoire for the 90th Anniversary Concert.

"We're opening with the *Festive Overture* by Shostakovich, just because it's big, splashy and festive and we're celebrating something, so why not? And then fifteen years ago, Margaret Brouwer was commissioned to write a piece called *Path at Sunrise, Masses of Flowers* for our 75th anniversary.

I'm very taken with the piece. I'm looking forward to doing it in two weeks and having Margaret with us to supervise in a rehearsal. It's a work that I may do with the Akron Youth Symphony or one of the other groups I conduct. She wrote it beautifully for amateur players to feel comfortable playing it, yet it uses a unique language. We're having great fun working on it, and it's great that we're able to revive it for this special occasion.



"And I came to love the Beethoven Triple Concerto when I was in high school. I've only conducted it once or twice since, so I'm glad to be able to revisit that as well. It's a really elegant, wonderful thing, and I have three soloists, all women, who will bring their artistry and skill to it. I really look forward to putting it all together.

"There's an absence of what a student of mine characterizes as 'macho Beethoven' in the triple concerto. There's none of the stormy, frowning Beethoven throwing his elbows around. It's just pure elegance, like the fourth piano concerto.

Schubert's "Unfinished" is on the program because I really adore the piece and also because it's kind of a metaphor for this orchestra: its mission is unfinished as well, just in terms of playing its music and being a place that's a real safe space for women.

"I love working with amateurs. They're very diligent, and what they don't bring to the task in terms of finely honed technique, they make up for with great affection and enthusiasm. And there's something to be said for a group that's playing Schubert's

“Unfinished Symphony” for the fifth and not the hundredth time, so it’s still a special experience.

“Then we’re going to finish off with a bang with Mikhail Ippolitov-Ivanov’s ‘Procession of the Sardar’ from *Caucasian Sketches*, his most famous piece. It’s just fun to play and it makes a big splashy sound. When you’re working with amateurs, you have to remember that they’re not working for pay. So if you’ve got percussion players, you have to make sure that you’ve got a piece that gives everybody a chance to play.

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