

Cleveland Orchestra brass and percussion take center stage to celebrate Akron's bicentennial

by Stephanie Manning



Composer and conductor Peter Boyer has a lot on his plate. But when recording producer Elaine Martone called him two years ago with an offer from Tuesday Musical, he just couldn't say no.

"I knew I already had these two huge commissions for 2026, so I was a little hesitant," he said in a recent interview. "But I could tell that this was going to be a really cool project, because we had great people involved. It was just too good to pass up."

The brass and percussion players of the Cleveland Orchestra, led by principal trumpet Michael Sachs, will premiere Boyer's *Festive Fanfare (For Akron's Bicentennial)* on Tuesday, April 22. Presented by Tuesday Musical, the 7:30 pm concert at E.J. Thomas Hall celebrates Akron's 200th birthday with music by Giovanni Gabrieli, Percy Grainger, and Modest Mussorgsky.

Boyer will be conducting his own piece — a regular occurrence, but one that has become less common in the past few years while he has focused on composing. "So when one is asked to do it oneself, it's always very nice, especially with such a great group," he said.

He's also looking forward to the recording session in Severance Music Center, which will preserve the piece for open-access use at Akron civic events. Local Grammy-winning producer Elaine Martone will lead the project. Boyer's works *Ellis Island: The Dream of America* and *Silver Fanfare* have both been performed in Severance, and he said he owns countless recordings that were created in that famous hall. "So that is a nice way to connect with some history."

The composer also spent plenty of time researching Akron's history — from its status as the "Rubber Capital of the World" in the 20th century to its thriving arts scene of today.

But the four-minute piece reaches for overarching feelings rather than literal representations. “I wanted something that has a lot of energy,” Boyer said. “But there's also a moment of repose and reflection before we return to this big, jubilant fanfare material.”

Cleveland Orchestra principal trumpet Michael Sachs praised Boyer’s musical language, comparing him to great American composers like John Williams, Samuel Barber, and Aaron Copland. Boyer’s most recent fanfare “has a lot of rhythmic vibrancy,” Sachs said in a recent interview. “It really encapsulates a very American language of music as a celebration of the bicentennial for Akron.”

Sachs, who has performed with the Orchestra since 1988, is no stranger to curating programs of brass ensemble repertoire. As the artistic director of the National Brass Ensemble, he’s spearheaded events that brought together players from orchestras all over the country. But a program that features Cleveland’s entire brass and percussion sections is different. “In my time in the Orchestra, this is the first time that we've done something on this scale,” he said.

Boyer’s fanfare, which arrives right after intermission, is just one part of the varied repertoire. The first half intersperses two antiphonal pieces by Giovanni Gabrieli — arranged by San Francisco Symphony trombonist Tim Higgins — with two percussion-only works. Percy Grainger’s *Lincolnshire Posy*, “a pillar of the wind ensemble repertoire” also arranged by Higgins, rounds things out.

Sachs used a baseball analogy to compare the demands of a program like this to those of an orchestral setting. “In the orchestra, I would say it’s akin to being a relief pitcher — you sit there for a while and then you’ve gotta come in and throw hundred-mile-an-hour fastballs,” he said. “But with this kind of an ensemble, you’re playing constantly. So the athleticism is a little bit different.”

That situation is especially true for the final piece of the night: Modest Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition*, arranged by the late composer and trumpeter Elgar Howarth. “It’s definitely a tour de force,” Sachs said, noting that the demanding arrangement features every single person in some capacity. “So I thought it was a perfect showpiece for the group.”

The challenge of playing virtuosic parts originally written for instruments like violin or oboe “is great for your playing,” he added. “It challenges you and stretches you in different ways, artistically, that make you more of a complete player that you can bring back into the orchestra.”

Ultimately, Sachs said his goal as a curator was to showcase the multifaceted sounds of the brass and percussion sections while keeping the audience in mind. “I want people to

walk out with a big grin on their face after the concert, really feeling energized and like they witnessed something special. “

Published on ClevelandClassical.com April 10, 2025.

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