

The Cleveland Orchestra: Fifteen minutes with tenor Andrew Haji

by Mike Telin



The Cleveland Orchestra and Chorus will appropriately mark Easter weekend with three performances of Johann Sebastian Bach's dramatic *Easter Oratorio* led by guest conductor Bernard Labadie on Thursday, April 17 and Friday, April 18 at 7:30 and Saturday, April 19 at 8 pm in Mandel Concert Hall at Severance Music Center. Tickets are available [online](#).

Bach re-purposed a secular cantata to create his narrative of the resurrection of Jesus in 1725. Labadie will pair the *Easter Oratorio* on these programs with Bach's *Magnificat*, a lovely (and unique for Bach) setting of the song Mary sang after learning she would bear Jesus, as reported in the Gospel of Luke.

The soloists for both works include soprano Joëlle Harvey, mezzo-soprano Adèle Charvet, tenor Andrew Haji, and bass-baritone Gordon Bintner. Bach's festive *Sinfonia* from Cantata 29 completes the program.

I spoke with Canadian tenor Andrew Haji by phone to get his impressions about his very different role in the two works.

Mike Telin: Where am I finding you?

AH: I'm at home in Toronto at the moment. I just got back from New York last night and will head out to Cleveland on Monday morning. It's a bit of a quick layover, but you have to take these moments when you can just to go home and reset.

MT: *You were with Bernard Labadie performing the evangelist in the St. John Passion with The Orchestra of St. Luke's.*

AH: Exactly. It's a pretty epic undertaking, because you're narrating the entire story — you're helping it unfold. But it's very fulfilling to perform that role.

MT: *How does performing the Passion compare to doing the Easter Oratorio and the Magnificat?*

AH: They're very different. The passion is the story of Jesus' last moments, so it's very solemn, whereas the *Easter Oratorio* and the *Magnificat* are about the hope of renewal and joy. Vocally, they're also quite a bit different. As the evangelist, you're singing recitative the entire time. You're telling the story, you're helping things unravel. In the *Magnificat* the tenor sings just the two arias, so it's a very different beast vocally.

MT: *And those two arias couldn't be more different.*

AH: They're both taken from the Song of Mary, of course. The first one, *Et misericordia*, a duet with the mezzo-soprano, talks about how God is showing his mercy to those who fear him. It's close to the heart, raw and very moving. The second, *Deposuit potentes*, a solo aria for me, showcases God's power and might. It's very exciting both to sing and listen to.

MT: *Back to the Easter Oratorio. The four soloists have named roles to sing, and the tenor plays Simon Peter. Do you think that your character was kind of a scoundrel?*

AH: That's an interesting connection to explore. Of course, in the *St. John Passion*, the evangelist, sings about the one who denies Jesus three times leading up to his crucifixion. And at the end he weeps bitterly after realizing what he had done.

In the *Easter Oratorio*, there's a moment where Jesus asks Peter if he loves him, and that's seen as sort of a redemption. Peter's a very complex figure, but he reminds us that even the most devoted people can falter, and that forgiveness and redemption are very much possible.

MT: *You're working with Bernard again this week — I don't remember a time when he wasn't a leader in the early music scene.*

AH: My first experience working with Maestro Labadie was back in January of 2009, when I sang in the chorus of a concert performance of *Magic Flute* in Toronto. I was still in university and very new to the opera scene. I think it may have been my very first

time performing in an opera, but even then I could tell that he was a one-of-a-kind conductor. He understands the music and the style. He understands the composers, especially Mozart and Bach, and he holds the work that they've done in highest esteem.

When you're working with him, he encourages you to let the score speak — you don't need to add all the extraneous embellishment or vocal fireworks that a lot of conductors will ask you to do. He just wants you to tell the story on the page by letting the composer speak through you. It's refreshing to work with someone like him who trusts what the composer has done and just allows you to bring that to life.

I've had the privilege of working with him a number of times over the past few years and they're always richly fulfilling experiences. He challenges you as a singer to do the best you can, and he knows what to say to get it out of you.

MT: Is he planning to do any kind of staging in this program?

AH: Not as far as I know. But with these pieces, especially the *Magnificat*, there's so much drama inherent in the music. Bach was a master at combining the text, the orchestration, and the vocal forces to create this — I don't want to say theatrical experience — but as close as you can get with just music.

MT: And you have some wonderful colleagues.

AH: I actually just worked with Joelle in New York when we did the *St. John Passion*. I've known Gordon Bittner since 2012. We met in the Canadian Opera Company young artist training program, and we've been friends ever since. We actually get to sing a duet together, which will be fun.

MT: I understand that you're a native of Ontario.

AH: I was born and raised in London, Ontario, which is just across the lake from Cleveland. I've been living in Toronto since 2007 when I started school here.

MT: What made you want to be an opera singer?

AH: That's an interesting question because I came to opera relatively late. I started singing in choirs when I was around eight years old. I loved singing and the collaborative aspect of singing with other people, but I never considered it to be a career choice.

When I graduated high school, I went into computer science but after two and a half years I really wasn't happy. So I took some time off, did some soul searching, had some late night chats with my former music teachers, and decided to give singing a chance to see if I could make a career out of it.

I started as a first year voice studies student at the University of Toronto in 2007. I did four years of that, then a two year master's degree, then three years with the Canadian Opera Company in their training program, and I've been doing opera ever since.

I'm pretty sure my first experience with opera was that *Magic Flute* concert performance with Bernard Labadie. I don't want to say that he was the spark that got everything started, but it was definitely a formative experience with opera that shaped my appreciation for the art. So, it's kind of cool to still be working with Bernard all these years later.

I love opera but I've been doing a lot more concert work these days. I'll be lucky if I get to do a couple of operas during the year. The rest is filled with concerts, especially around Easter and Christmas, when there's plenty of beautiful music to be sung.

The concert contracts are usually shorter, about a week at a time, and you get to work with different singers and conductors each time. Then I get to go home and be with my wife and my five-year-old son. It's all about finding a balance, and I think I've found a really good one.

MT: Do you have a favorite opera character?

AH: Interestingly enough, I have a favorite opera *and* a favorite character and they're not the same.

I know this might sound cliché, but the opera is *La bohème* just because of the raw passion and the theatricality of the music. On the other hand, if I had to name the character from the opera repertoire that I connect with the most, I would have to say Nemorino from *The Elixir of Love*. He's a poor peasant who wears his heart on his sleeve and always sees the best in everyone. I think if we all took a page from his book it would make the world a much better place.

MT: And with Nemorino you get another great aria.

AH: I love the feeling that you get from the audience when they hear the bassoon playing those first notes and a hush comes over them. It's an amazing feeling to have this

immense power to help people forget something that's been troubling them, or just to transport them away from this crazy world for a few minutes.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com April 16, 2025

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