

Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra: a conversation with pianist Saya Uejima

by Mike Telin



Saya Uejima has served as keyboardist of the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra since 2023, a position she enjoys very much. “I love having fun and collaborating with other people, whether it’s being part of the orchestra or playing chamber music,” she said during a telephone conversation.

Her position with COYO has also provided her with such opportunities as learning how to play the celesta and Severance Hall’s Norton Memorial Organ. “That was very new to me because I did not know how to use the pedals or how to set up the stops.”

On Sunday, May 4 at 3:00 pm, Saya Uejima will move to the front of the Severance Music Center stage when she performs Edvard Grieg’s *Piano Concerto* with The Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra. Under the direction of Daniel Reith, the program also

includes Sarah Kirkland Snider’s *Something for the Dark*, and Edward Elgar’s *Enigma Variations*.

Mike Telin: Congratulations on winning the concerto competition.

Saya Uejima: Thank you so much.

MT: Why did you choose the Grieg?

SU: There are a few reasons. I have been wanting to play it since I was young, but I didn’t have enough power or experience.

Most importantly, our conductor Daniel Reith is in his final season with COYO — he studied in Norway and had a lot of experiences playing Grieg so I really wanted to play the piece with him. And I really like the key of a minor.

Another thing I like about the concerto is that the second movement contrasts with the first and the third movements. The second is so beautiful and calming. For me it's a highlight. And the flute solo is very pretty.

MT: Have you enjoyed learning it?

SU: I have, but It's been a journey. I started learning it in the mid 2000s and brought it out again last year to prepare for the COYO competition.

MT: I'm sure your teacher, Haewon Song, has been helpful.

SU: She has been very helpful, not only with learning this concerto but repertoire in general. And with musical expression.

MT: You've enjoyed working with Daniel Reith?

SU: Very much. He is very gentle and has so many ideas, which I really love. And he isn't afraid to speak out, which is really great. Some people tend to keep their opinions to themselves, but he always tells us what he thinks. I really like his way of connecting to us in the Orchestra — and he has such a nice personality. When we had a few coachings on the Grieg his thoughts really helped me shape the concerto.

MT: Where do you go to school?

SU: I'm a sophomore at Green High School.

MT: I understand that you have aspirations to be a neurosurgeon.

SU: Yes. Ever since I was young, I loved the piano, but I always knew that I wanted to pursue something in the medical field. I want to help anyone who is suffering from anything. But neuroscience really stood out to me. I don't really know why, but it just was lingering in my head.

MT: What other activities do you enjoy?

SU: I like to listen to many genres of music but especially opera. I've had an interest in it ever since the pandemic when the Metropolitan Opera released a new opera every week for free. That's when I really got into opera and classical singing.

MT: Do you have a favorite opera?

I really like *Lucia di Lammermoor* by Donizetti. That's an amazing piece. I also enjoy Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*.

MT: Back to Grieg: Do you know any of his other works?

SU: The concerto is my first Grieg piece, so I was very new to his music which is quite interesting and very different from what I usually play — like Liszt. And Grieg is very different from my favorite composer, Shostakovich. The first work that I played with COYO was his *Symphony No. 5*. It's such an amazing piece.

MT: And there's a celesta part at the end of the first movement.

SU: There is! That piece gave me a new perspective on things. I wasn't just by myself. I was with the strings, the brass, the woodwinds, and the percussion. I also got used to counting!

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