

ChamberFest Cleveland: A conversation with pianist/composer Michael Stephen Brown

by Mike Telin



Season thirteen of ChamberFest Cleveland gets under way on Wednesday, June 11 at 7:30 pm in Mixon Hall at the Cleveland Institute of Music.

The program — “Lost and Found” — features J.S. Bach’s *Concerto for Two Keyboards in C major*, Felix Mendelssohn’s *String Octet*, and Michael Stephen Brown’s *The Lotos-Eaters* (with the composer at the piano). Executive director Jessica Peek Sherwood presents the pre-concert festival welcome at 6:30 pm. Although this concert is sold out, the Festival runs through June 28. Tickets are available [online](#).

I caught up with composer/pianist Michael Stephen Brown on Zoom and began our conversation by asking him if this year would be his second or third visit to ChamberFest.

Michael Stephen Brown: This will be my second, but I’ve known Roman and Diana for a long time, so I look forward to returning. I met them both at the Ravinia Festival, and Roman being a fellow pianist, we had a lot in common. We became fast friends and loved to play for each other and play four-hand music together. Then he came to Juilliard — I was already there — and we both studied with Robert McDonald.

Roman has always encouraged my composing side. I wrote him a piano piece in 2016 called *Surfaces*. We've always had an open and creative dialogue. So he's been a great friend.

MT: What was your trajectory to composition?

MSB: My first piano teacher on Long Island, where I'm from, was also a composer, and from my first lesson he encouraged me to write short pieces in the style of Mozart. So I've been approaching music from the performer and composer angles my whole life.

MT: Your piece, The Lotos Eaters, is on ChamberFest's opening concert.

MSB: I'm looking forward to it. I'm also playing J.S. Bach's *Concerto for Two Keyboards* with Roman on that concert. Talk about being a performer composer — it's like a dream concert for me.

MT: How did you come to write the piece?



MSB: It all came about because I've been part of a book club and we read a lot of English literature including Alfred Lord Tennyson. And my friend who leads the sessions suggested that I read the poem called *The Lotos Eaters*.

When I read it I thought it was so musically evocative and had so much imagery and music in the poetry that I wanted to find a way to be inspired by the text without actually setting the words. I've done that a number of times where I write a piece that's inspired by a poem, a painting, or statues at the Met Museum of Art.

Then I was commissioned by the Bridgehampton Chamber Music Festival out on Long Island to write a piece for flute and percussion. I thought this was the perfect opportunity to write something inspired by *The Lotos Eaters*.

The work is for flute, cello, piano and percussion. And I went a little bit out of the box with my choice of percussion instruments — like the rice bowls played with chopsticks and the pianist playing the angklung (bamboo rattle) at the beginning.

MT: How did you incorporate Tennyson's poetry into the piece?

MSB: I basically took five lines from the poem and crafted five movements around those images and poetic lines.

MT: I love how — from the first movement — you use so many different percussion instruments. How did you decide which ones to include?

MSB: That's a good point because I have limited knowledge of percussion instruments. The percussionist I was writing for, Ian David Rosenbaum, is a good friend and someone I involved pretty deeply into the composition process of the work. So I would go to his studio in Brooklyn and say to him, hey, 'I'm trying to get this sound' or 'I'm trying to evoke this image' and we would literally play around and hit all sorts of metal and wooden objects with all sorts of different things in his studio until I felt like we were coming close to the sounds that I imagined in my head.

Ian would often say 'I think the pitched wood slats would sound better than this,' for example. And that's how we came up with the pitched wood slats, the pitched metal bars, and the rice bowls with chopsticks.

Basically I ripped that effect from Lou Harrison's *Varied Trio*, but I used more rice bowls and used them for a much longer period of time.

MT: How did the text influence the mood of the piece?

MSB: The text is often very slow and lazy and I thought, well, the whole piece can't just be slow, I need to reflect on the life The Lotos Eaters were giving up. That's why after the slow introduction with the rice bowls in the second movement the music becomes frenetic and pulsating. It was also the vehicle to showcase all those funky percussive sounds I had been playing around with.

MT: You write very well for flute and cello. But the doublings that you have with the piano and vibraphone are stunning.

MSB: Thank you so much. I love the vibraphone and I was so inspired by Ian and his mastery of these keyboard percussion instruments and that was how I built the piece.

On Wednesday Michael Stephen Brown will be joined by flutist Brandon Patrick George, cellist Annie Jacobs-Perkins, and percussionist Tanner Tanyeri.

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