

Guest conductor Jonathon Heyward presents captivating program in Cleveland Orchestra debut (July 26)



Guest conductor Jonathon Heyward led the Cleveland Orchestra at Blossom Music Center Saturday night. Courtesy of Kevin Libal

By Kevin McLaughlin | Cleveland Classical

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CUYAHOGA FALLS, Ohio — The July 26 concert at Blossom Music Center marked the exciting Cleveland Orchestra debut of conductor Jonathon Heyward — the music director of the Baltimore Symphony and the Festival Orchestra of Lincoln Center. His program should have captivated even the most distant lawn

loungers with works by Dvořák and Beethoven, as well as a recent concerto by London-born composer Anna Clyne, who now resides in the United States.

The centerpiece of the evening was Clyne's *Glasslands*, a haunting, kaleidoscopic concerto for soprano saxophone, written for the 27-year-old British saxophonist Jess Gillam, who premiered it with the Detroit Symphony in 2023 and performed it on Saturday with beauty and authority.

In Irish folklore, the banshee is a keening, female spirit who predicts the death of a family member. The three-movement work draws on a wide range of effects from shrieking caterwauls and smoky purrs to rapid-fire runs and breathy whispers to shape its eerie, dramatic arc. The orchestration, especially in the winds and brass, is replete with spectral color and tension, reinforcing the piece's ghostly atmosphere.

Gillam was an assured, magnetic presence, and Heyward her attentive partner. Together, they put Clyne's score across with astonishing clarity. The audience responded warmly,

eliciting from Gillam a sultry encore that matched the weather: Duke Ellington's In a Sentimental Mood.

The program opened with Dvořák's Carnival Overture, enlivened by Heyward's blend of high energy and control. Winds and percussion sparkled, adding festive color and rhythmic bite, while the strings propelled the music forward. Heyward handled the overture's rapid mood swings with cool certainty.

The contrasting middle section, featuring a delicate duet between solo violin and woodwinds, offered a breath of poetic calm before the return of full orchestral exuberance.

Heyward is a confident and genial presence onstage. Conducting mostly without a baton, he manages to communicate both the long arc and local details of a piece with his wrists alone, drawing crisp articulations and expressive nuances from the ensemble.

As a closer, Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony gave the Kent Blossom Chamber Orchestra musicians the opportunity to perform alongside their Cleveland Orchestra mentors. The performance glowed, capturing both the symphony's rustic charm and its undercurrents of drama. Thanks to an earlier storm at Blossom, this part wasn't merely programmatic.

Heyward's pacing was brisk but lyrical, offering glimpses of his extraordinary talent while keeping the musical ride smooth and rewarding for everyone on board.

After spending several weeks studying chamber music, participants in the Kent Blossom Music Festival turned their attention to orchestral repertoire. And at 6:00 pm on Saturday, under the deft baton of Daniel Reith, the Kent Blossom Chamber Orchestra presented a prelude concert of thoroughly enjoyable performances of Mendelssohn's Concert Overture Die schöne Melusine and Kodaly's Dances of Galanta.

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