

## The Cleveland Orchestra & Beethoven Nine: A conversation with tenor Miles Mykkanen

by Mike Telin



“I think that Beethoven Nine is the ultimate piece about unity and human brotherhood,” tenor Miles Mykkanen said during a Zoom conversation from his home in Ironwood, Michigan. “Every time I sing it I think about the millions of people who have either performed it or heard it over the last two centuries and how it reminds us of the goodness in all of us — that’s what life is all about.”

On Thursday, October 23 at 7:30 pm at Severance Music Center Mykkanen will join soprano Joëlle Harvey, mezzo-soprano Taylor Raven, and bass-baritone Dashon Burton, The Cleveland Orchestra and Chorus in Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 9*. Conducted by music director Franz Welser-Möst, the

performance also includes Jean Sibelius’ *Tapiola*. The program will be repeated on Friday and Saturday at 7:30 pm and Sunday at 3:00 pm. Tickets are available [online](#).

Mykkanen made his Cleveland Orchestra debut as Brighella in Richard Strauss’s *Ariadne auf Naxos* in 2019 and he returned last spring to sing the role of Steva in Leoš Janáček’s *Jenůfa*. “I’m just thrilled to be back to sing a piece that is 200 years old and still brings the audiences to their feet. And to perform it in Severance with The Cleveland Orchestra, my great quartet colleagues, and Franz Welser-Möst on the podium — that’s very special for any singer.”

The tenor said that while it isn't difficult to sit and listen to the glorious music of the Symphony's first three movements, what is hard is making sure that you're ready to go when the time comes. "Once that 'Ode to Joy' begins, it just keeps going, and we've got to be prepared. The Turkish March, which has the famous tenor solo with the bassoons, winds, and male chorus, is so exposed for the tenor. And as soon as I start singing, it's over before I know it. It's like being shot out of a cannon."

Mykkanen said that there's nothing like standing in front of the musical forces and singing a piece has survived all the wars and turmoil over the last two hundred years. "It is still a symbol of our resilience as the human race and our brotherhood. I think about that when I sing Beethoven Nine and I wonder what listeners were thinking when they heard it during the World Wars in the 20th century. But I never get tired of it. Honestly, I could sing it for the rest of my life — and I hope I do."

It wasn't until the first rehearsal for *Ariadne auf Naxos* that Mykkanen met Franz Welser-Möst. "I had sung for the Orchestra's artistic administration, so they knew me, but being cast as Brighella was really kind of an audition. Thankfully from our first rehearsals there was a connection between the podium and the stage. As a singer you can feel when a conductor is really listening to you and what you're doing, and is able to keep it together. Franz is probably the greatest at doing that. It was just a joy performing the Strauss with him. And then, to come back last season in the Janáček and go head to head with Nina Stemme and LaTanya Moore was just a lot of fun."

Like many singers during the Pandemic, Mykkanen watched as one performance after another was cancelled. "I look back on it now that things have corrected themselves and think 'Oh, Miles, why did you stress so much during COVID?' But when I think back to the start of my relationship to Cleveland from where we are now six or seven years later, my gosh it's been a roller coaster ride."

Looking at Mykkanen's 2025-26 season it's apparent that the Finnish-American tenor is riding a wave, beginning with the role of Sam Clay in Mason Bates and Gene Scheer's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, which opened the Metropolitan Opera's new season last month.

"That is kind of the pinnacle of any career in a way. I was pinching myself through all of it thinking 'I'm a kid from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan who grew up in the woods.' How am I out here on the world's biggest stage with these amazing colleagues — Maestro Nézet-Séguin in the pit and the Met Orchestra — doing a new piece about minorities and immigrants fighting fascism, just like Beethoven

Nine. I think both of these pieces are all too relevant in 2025.” Due to the Opera’s success the Met has added four performances in February 2026.

In April Mykkanen will make a third visit to the Met Stage for Kaija Saariaho’s final opera *Innocence*, conducted by Susanna Mälkki.

On January 30 he will perform a solo recital at Carnegie Hall. “I sang a recital at Carnegie under the auspices of the Marilyn Horne program ‘The Song Continues.’ That was a half recital that I shared with soprano Clarissa Lyons, so technically this is not my Carnegie Hall debut. I’m excited about the program because my pianist Adam Rothenberg, one of my frequent collaborators — we were at Juilliard together — are preparing a lot of Finnish music by Kilpinen and Sibelius and some Rachmaninoff, Britten, and Schubert. I’m excited about the recital. I love the song repertoire and having that opportunity to perform at a place like Carnegie in the middle of this season is amazing.” Click [here](#) to view Miles Mykkanen’s full 2025-26 performance schedule.



While it’s clear that Mykkanen is passionate about his profession, he lit up when asked about the festival he founded out of a desire to create community around the arts in his hometown of Ironwood. The annual [Emberlight Festival](#) features chamber music, cabaret, theater,

visual art, and folk art as well as an international film festival.

“I still can’t believe that we are doing things like the film festival. By the end of this year we’ll have received over 4,000 films over the last six years from 87 countries, and we’re presenting the best of those. And for the performances, I’m trying to bring friends from Broadway and the Met to town. But the real secret sauce of Emberlight that I did not see coming when I started this whole thing was discovering the vibrant and rich, artist communities here in the Upper Peninsula and Northern Wisconsin.”

Growing up in the Western U.P., Mykkanen was well aware of the deep tradition of music, Finnish culture and singing in choruses, but he still wondered if anyone who lived there would be interested in a festival like Emberlight. “As soon as we started it we had artists coming out of the woodwork saying, ‘I live here.’ We did a survey of the local art organizations in Gogebic County, which has fewer than 6,000 people, and over 500 of them identified as artists, either retired artists or

full-time artists who live up here. Many of them work outside of the area and actually have fabulous careers, but they find their inspiration from the nature in this beautiful part of the world.”

The idea to create a festival first came to Mykkanen during the Pandemic, when he was at home doing too much hiking and camping, and trying to social distance and think about his life.

“I started to look around and realized that this is a really artful community with a lot of potential. That has proven to be true, and the whole festival has just kind of taken off. It’s an honor for me to lead it and bring the art from my friends and colleagues to Ironwood. It’s also given Ironwood an opportunity to show themselves off to those visitors. We’ve had audiences from 42 states across the country come and visit, so each year we say let’s keep going, let’s keep bringing art to the U.P. — and it’s working.

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