

Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra: a Conversation with James Feddeck

By Mike Telin



“I’ve always had a special place in my mind and in my heart for The Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra,” James Feddeck said during a Zoom conversation. “These young people are so exceptional — they humble me.”

On Friday, November 21 at 8:00 pm James Feddeck, who served as COYO’s music director for four seasons from 2009-2013, will return to Severance Music Center to lead the ensemble in a program that includes his own suite from Prokofiev’s ballet *Romeo and Juliet*, and César Franck’s *Symphony in D minor*. Tickets are available [online](#).

Feddeck, who is currently serving as principal conductor and musical advisor of The Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra, said that

he chose *Romeo and Juliet* because it is a compelling story. “I’ve selected several movements and different sections from Prokofiev’s full ballet to create a suite that’s about a half hour long. What’s appealing about it is the color and the energy that is in the music. There is literally something colorful and virtuosic for every section of the orchestra to play.”

Feddeck said that while the Prokofiev is a great exploration of rhythm, Franck’s *Symphony* is a beautiful exploration of sound. “It’s a thick orchestration, so it gives the players an opportunity to work on their tone quality, articulation, and blending — creating a sense of ensemble.”

The conductor noted that the Franck is “a story of transformation from that opening question in the low strings that keeps returning until it is finally fulfilled in D major at the very end of the piece. I think it’s a very important piece in musical history that ought to be played more often.”

Switching topics, I asked James Feddeck why he wanted to return to COYO. “To be honest, I’ve had a number of people say to me, ‘Why did you take this on?’ It is a bit unusual for a professional conductor to make this kind of investment in a program for young people.”

Since he left in 2013, Feddeck has seen a progression in that generation. “Many students that I had back then I’ve encountered in other places. Some are playing in orchestras around the world that I guest conducted. I have a bass player in Auckland, New Zealand. There was somebody subbing in the Chicago Symphony when I was conducting there.”

Feddeck has also encountered former students who are not working in music. “They’re all doing incredible things in their field of choice. There are doctors, scientists, lawyers, teachers, and engineers. And they all say to me that it was the intensity of the COYO program that gave them an advantage over their peers.”

He said that it’s been interesting to hear firsthand from former students that they feel the COYO program has helped them in everything that they have done in life in terms of focus, discipline, and attention to detail. “So, I’ve been very enthusiastic about this program from a distance now since leaving in 2013.”

Feddeck said he had an awakening coming out of the pandemic. “I felt that every serious artist has a responsibility to do something for the next generation. So when this opportunity unfolded, it resonated with me a great deal. It was both a personal resonance and seeing the results this program has had on so many former students.”

The COYO program is unique in the world of Youth Orchestras, due in large part to The Cleveland Orchestra connection. The program runs from August to May with rehearsals taking place every week in Mandel Concert Hall, not in a secondary location. The players are also mentored by members of The Cleveland Orchestra.

“We just had a side-by-side a couple weeks ago where the young musicians sat with Cleveland Orchestra musicians and played through the repertoire. And I said to the students, ‘Do you know how many people of any age would give anything to have that experience? To not only attend a Cleveland Orchestra rehearsal, but to be close to the

people and hear how they play, to interact with them — it's a very special program centered on excellence with the Cleveland Orchestra as the guide. That's so appealing to me. I've seen the incredible success of this program, which is going to be 40 years old next year."

James Feddeck looks forward to Friday's concert. "I still get shivers when I walk on the stage of Mandel Hall. Looking at this beautiful place and seeing how enthusiastic these young people are about being there too — that's just great."

Published on ClevelandClassical.com November 18, 2025

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)