

Benjamin Yusupov: ChamberFest Cleveland's Composer-in-Residence

By Mike Telin



Benjamin Yusupov, ChamberFest Cleveland's Composer-in Residence, is Music Director and Principal Conductor of the Israel Soloists Chamber Orchestra founded by him in 2015. He also serves as Music Director and Principal Conductor of the Hakfar Hayarok Youth Symphony Orchestra and as Composer-in-Residence of the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra.

During a Zoom call from his home in Kfar Saba, Israel, Yusupov said that he received the invitation to ChamberFest from the co-artistic directors Diana Cohen and Roman Rabinovich.

“Roman has played many of my pieces. He performed my piano concerto with the Haifa Symphony and he's also played my solo piano piece, *Crossroads No. 2* that will be performed at the festival in Cleveland. So Roman and his wife Diana are my good friends.”

Born in Dushanbe Tajikistan in 1962, Yusupov began studying piano at the age of five and improvisation and composition at the age of seven.

In his early teens he entered music school in his home city, studying the classical repertoire with a Jewish music teacher from Ukraine and composition with a Tajiki Muslim. He later studied piano, composition, and conducting at the Tchaikovsky State Conservatory in Moscow. He received his PhD at Bar-Ilan University.

Yusupov has always been fascinated by the different musical cultures of Tajikistan. During an interview with the British/Israeli pianist and scholar Benjamin Goodman,

Yusupov explained that Tajikistan has three distinct regions, each with its own traditional music. In the northern region of Bukhara and Samarkand the music is based on [shashmaqom](#). In the south, the music resembles that of neighbouring Afghanistan. And in the Pamir Mountains that extend into China, the local music is similar to Tibetan music.

The composer's *Piano Trio No. 2*, "From Jewish Traditions" will be featured on Wednesday, June 17 at 7:30 in Mixon Hall with an onstage talkback to follow. Yusupov explained that the inspiration for the piece can be directly traced to his research for his doctoral thesis.

"For my PhD I examined the roots of Jewish music, especially that of the Bukharan Jews from Central Asia. I investigated the twelve Jewish communities that are now present in Israel and I found that it's very musically contrasting. For example, Ethiopian, Polish, Georgian, Bukharan or Moroccan Jews all have a musical identity. But that musical identity is not really similar to the music of the country where the tradition comes from."

Yusupov explained that Yiddish, for example, is not exactly a German language. "It's maybe 80% German plus 20% is from Hebrew. The same is true of Ladino — it's not exactly a Spanish language but a mix of Spanish with Jewish idioms. And you can say that klezmer is similar to Romanian or Balkan music and it is some of that, along with a stamp of Jewish identity."

The composer said that when writing his trio he decided to answer the question, "what is a Jewish musical tradition?" "So I took three short melodies from different traditions in Israel and added my own compositional style. The result is similar to what Bartók, Enescu, and Smetana did. They took the source material and added their own compositional style, which you hear immediately."

Written in 2018 for the ATAR TRIO, each of the work's three movements is derived from a Jewish musical tradition. The first is based on an Ashkenazi Jewish song "Mayn shtetele Belz." The second, which is entirely an improvisation in the Spanish style, is based on a song of the Deportees of Spain (1492), "La yave de Espanya." The final movement is based on a Yemenite song "Esh'al Elohai." Yusupov said that the use of sources is quite free, and the main idea is to preserve the spirit of things and to bring the sound of authentic instruments to the classical piano trio.

On Thursday, June 18, *Crossroads No. 2* for solo piano will be featured. "This is completely different from the trio but based on the same idea. I took a liturgical chant and paired it with Persian or maqam. The most interesting for me was to hear how the

influences change. The first time you hear this chant one way, and the second time it sounds different.”

The composer’s third featured work on ChamberFest will be his *Quintet for Marimba and Strings* on Saturday, June 20. “There are two movements. The first is very dramatic and the second is inspired by the rhythms of Tajikistan.”

Switching the topic to Yusupov’s most recent works, the composer said he has just finished a new composition commissioned by the Haifa Symphony — a concerto for two pianos, eight-hands, and orchestra.

“It’s called *Ancient Voices*. I took eight different civilizations starting in Egypt and moving to Mesopotamia, China, India, Rome, Byzantium, Mongolia, and Persia and tried to recreate how music from 2,000 to 3,000 years ago sounded. Of course we don’t have any musical sources from that time. We plan to show pictures during the performance of what we know about these ancient cultures.”

Yusupov is also working on his third symphony that is dedicated to the city of Jerusalem. “Next year we celebrate 60 years of Jerusalem. You know that after the Six Day War in '67, East and West Jerusalem were reconnected. The piece was commissioned by the Jerusalem Symphony and I will conduct it myself.”

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