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Cleveland Philharmonic begins season with new music director Dean Buck

by Mike Telin



Founded in 1938 by bass clarinetist Alfred Zetzer, oboist Robert Zupnik, and cellist Irving Klein, The Cleveland Philharmonic Orchestra was first formed to provide a training ground for young people who were interested in professional careers as orchestra musicians. Both Zetzer and Zupnik went on to play with The Cleveland Orchestra and Klein had a long chamber music career.

Conductor Dean Buck said during a Zoom conversation, "If you look at a list of who has won the Philharmonic's Schumacher Young Artist competition, names like Laurie Smuckler, Orion Weiss, Jinjoo Cho, and James Thompson are only a few of many who went on to have great careers. It's very cool to be at the helm of this storied Orchestra which still holds an interesting place in the Cleveland music scene."

On Saturday, October 17 at 7:30 pm at Disciples Christian Church, Dean Buck will begin his first season as music director of the Cleveland Philharmonic with a concert that includes works by Emily Mayer, Felix Mendelssohn, and Beethoven. The program will be repeated on Sunday, October 18 at 3:00 pm at Westlake Performing Arts Center.Tickets are available online.

A native of Cleveland, Buck holds a Bachelor's Degree in Music Performance from The New School, and a Masters Degree in Orchestral Conducting from The Cleveland Institute of Music.

"I knew about the Cleveland Philharmonic growing up because Debbie Yandala, the mother of a good friend of mine played in the viola section — and she still does." Buck

said that when he relocated back to Cleveland, the Orchestra's board president and member of the first violin section Renee Wagner reached out to him saying they were looking for someone to take over as acting music director for a couple of concerts. "I agreed to do it, and we had a lot of fun together. So they extended me for the year and then named me the orchestra's ninth music director."



What excites Buck about taking on the position? "I admire the degree to which the players embrace challenges in every way. Even though they're volunteers, they treat the repertoire and the process as professionals. They show up prepared and they want to take on demanding repertoire. And everyone's just really nice."

Buck said that in his first season as music director, his goal was to program repertoire that would get the orchestra playing and thinking as a unit. "I really wanted to program Beethoven Five because it had been a while since the orchestra had played it. And violinist Konrad Kowal and I had been talking about doing the Mendelssohn Concerto for some time and I thought that those two pieces would go great together. And Emily Mayer's *Faust* Overture is a lovely piece that makes a great pairing with Beethoven's Fate Symphony and the story of Faust.

When it comes to programming, Buck said that it's important to bring out works by female composers that haven't been played because of discrimination and misogyny. "Emily Mayer is an amazing composer who not many people have heard of because of that."

The December concerts will include music by Josef Suk, Béla Bartók, Clint Needham, and Felix Mendelssohn. "One of the performances will be at the Bohemian National Hall, so I wanted to include a Czech composer, and Suk's *Tale of Winter's Eve* has been on my radar for a while. Violinist Emily Cornelius and I have worked together a million times, and I reached out to her because I've always wanted to feature her as a soloist. She suggested Bartók's *Rhapsody No. 2*."

Buck said that he asked Clint Needham to send him a few scores, and *Flourish* caught his attention. "It's a terrific piece. It's short, so it works really well as a second half opener. And I figured the Mendelssohn Reformation Symphony would be a really good holiday piece — it ends festively with a chorale."

Changing topics, Buck said that the guiding philosophy of the Cleveland Philharmonic can be found in its name. "Philharmonic always referred to a musician-organized group,

whereas a Symphony was a state or patron-organized group. Nowadays they basically mean the same thing, but it's cool that we still have the remnants of that tradition — musicians creating their own group."

The Cleveland Philharmonic is a community orchestra with the concertmaster being the only paid member, although Buck noted that they do hire a harpist and pianist as well as additional ringers as needed. "The Philharmonic is volunteer, but it is auditioned. We rehearse once a week and have five rehearsals and a dress for each concert."

Another thing Buck enjoys about the ensemble is the diversity of its membership, especially in terms of age. "There are people in their mid-20s through mid-70s and probably even up from there. And there are a lot of people who've been members for a long time, some for 35 years."

The Orchestra also attracts people who have studied music or played in youth orchestras who went on to have careers in other professions. "One of our first violinists, Amanda Opaskar, is a neurosurgeon, but she always played in youth orchestras growing up, and she's a great violinist. Another example is our principal bassist, Jeremy Poparad. He's a professional jazz player, but he plays in the Phil so he can stay close to classical music and orchestral music, because he loves that, too. So it's really all over the map, which is great. But everyone shows up ready to play."

Buck said he's happy that the audiences are as excited about the concerts as the orchestra is. "We had great turnouts last year, including one in December at Disciples Christian Church that was in the middle of a huge blizzard. It seems like the audience is really excited, and we get a diverse audience too, which is great."

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