

Preview

Jörg Widmann's new flute concerto: a conversation with Cleveland Orchestra principal flutist Joshua Smith

by Mike Telin



During the weeks leading up to a “world premiere” of anything, whether it be a concerto, a symphony, an opera, a dance or play, there is a sense of anticipation that is both exhilarating and a little scary for the performers. More often than not, world premieres are the result of a lengthy process that can be traced back three to four years, if not more.

There are many artistic topics

to be discussed, fundraising to be done — and then there’s the waiting for the final product to be written or choreographed, all before individual practice and ensemble rehearsals even begin.

On May 26, 27 & 28, under the direction of Franz Welser-Möst, The Cleveland Orchestra will give the world premiere performances of Jörg Widmann’s concerto for flute and orchestra, *Flûte en suite*, with the orchestra’s principal flutist, Joshua Smith as soloist. The Orchestra initially approached Mr. Smith four years ago about the possible commissioning of a new concerto. He was invited to choose the composer and after listening to many people’s music, eventually chose Jörg Widmann, who also became the Orchestra’s Daniel Lewis Young Composer Fellow.

Mr. Smith has been keeping the public informed since February about the progress of the new concerto via his blog and Facebook page as it began to arrive, movement by movement. “It’s been an interesting ride, and everything is going well. I think it’s a great

piece, and I'm really looking forward to doing it" Mr. Smith told CC.com by telephone last Friday.

Considering the pressure Mr. Smith must be feeling at the moment, he was as gracious and forthcoming as always. He talked about Widmann's writing, the new concerto and the sense of anticipation that comes with performing a world premiere for the first time during his professional life.

Choosing Jörg Widmann

I chose Jörg Widmann for a lot of reasons; I heard the music of probably eight to ten composers, and there were several possibilities, but I found myself really engaged with his music. I have enjoyed all of the music that I have listened to of his, and what appeals to me is that he imagines incredible sound worlds. A lot of composers are good at imagining ways to push instruments so that they sound different, but it can often sound like a catalogue of gratuitous special effects. But Widmann's way of approaching sound and color is very special: I feel very transported when I hear his music.

I felt that his writing for the flute would be enhanced because he is both a clarinet player and an excellent musician. Another thing that comes from being a clarinet player is that he plays a lot of new music in addition to his own music, but he is also a great interpreter of pieces like the Brahms clarinet quintet and the Mozart concerto, so he wants his music to be played like music and not like a technical or clinical exercise. He is not afraid to write lyric melodies, and those are all qualities of his that appeal to me.

The Concerto

It's styled as a quasi-baroque suite, meaning that structurally it is a series of eight short movements, and with the exception of a cadenza movement, and two chorales — which of course are baroque but not normally in baroque suites — the rest of the movements are all baroque dances. There is an allemande, sarabande, courante, etc.

People may recognize the baroque aspects a little bit, but it won't sound baroque at all. The sarabande is very slow and introspective and very often leans on the second beat. The allemande is very typical in that it swings back and forth, usually in two or four, and the chorales definitely sound like Bach chorales that have been twisted in a certain way. And the last movement is sort of his own re-digested version of the last movement of Bach's b minor suite, which is absolutely recognizable. He quotes it all over the place but he turns it upside down, and does a lot of creative things with it.

The Orchestration

It's a fairly small body of strings, but all instruments are represented, violins, violas cellos and basses. In the winds, there are three flutes, doubling on piccolo, alto, and bass, three oboes, including oboe d'amore and English horn. He also uses four horns and four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, and a small percussion battery, which includes glockenspiel and vibraphone and keyboards — celesta and harpsichord.

I have played some twentieth century pieces that have very lush orchestrations, and while this sounds like a lot, I would call it a chamber orchestra in a sense, because the string size is pretty small.

Scary or exciting?

Well that's a little bit tricky to answer, but one thing that is foreboding is that I don't have a point of reference. I have no idea what it's going to sound like. I have no idea what it's going to feel like. This is scary, but it's also exciting because all of the decisions that I make as far as interpreting it goes are not based on any kind of preconceived notion of tradition. I am doing everything that I need to be doing for the very first time. There is no recording to listen to to figure out how other people solved the problems. So I would say that while it's scary it's also very interesting. I guess the real scary part of it is that it's hard to imagine how it is going to all come together.

• • •

Joshua Smith plays the world premiere performances of Jörg Widmann's *Flûte en suite* with the Cleveland Orchestra at Severance Hall on Thursday, Friday and Saturday, May 26, 27 & 28. The Friday performance begins at 7 pm (part of the Fridays @ 7 Series); the other performances begin at 8.

Published on clevelandclassical.com May 24, 2011