

Preview

**Blue Water Chamber Orchestra: a conversation
with violin soloist James Thompson**

by Mike Telin



When the Blue Water Chamber Orchestra takes the stage at the Breen Center for the Performing Arts at St. Ignatius High School on Sunday, May 8, 2011 at 3 PM, the young violinist James Thompson will join them in a performance of Mozart's Violin Concerto #5 in A major, K. 219, "Turkish".

Mr. Thompson, the 2010 winner of the Jean L. Pettit Memorial Music Scholarship from the Cleveland Pops Orchestra, has appeared as a soloist with the Cleveland Pops, the Cleveland Philharmonic, the Suburban Symphony Orchestra, the Lakeland Symphony Orchestra and the Firelands Symphony Orchestra, and has also performed as soloist with the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra, where he serves as co-concertmaster.

Mr. Thompson, a Junior at St. Ignatius High School and a student of Paul Kantor at the Cleveland Institute of Music, is a young man who already presents himself as a seasoned professional.

Mike Telin: Congratulation on all of your successes.

James Thompson: Well, thank you.

MT: I was just listening to a YouTube of a couple movements from the Brahms G major sonata that you recently performed on the Brownbag Concert series at Trinity Cathedral. Very nice.

JT: I love that piece, and it was a great concert for me. The Brahms is defiantly one of my favorite sonatas.

MT: You will be playing the Mozart 5th concerto with the Blue Water Chamber Orchestra this weekend. Will this be your premier of that concerto?

JT: With orchestra, yes. I've been playing this particular concerto for a while now, but I have never gotten the chance to play it with an orchestra. And, it will also be my first time of playing any Mozart concerto with an orchestra, which is exciting for me.

MT: How many rehearsals will you get?

JT: I have one on Tuesday and Wednesday of this week, and Friday I am performing it at a City of Cleveland elementary school. It's sort of a warm-up concert and I think it should be really fun.

MT: How long have you been studying with Paul Kantor?

JT: I've been with Mr. Kantor for a very long time. I was lucky enough to get [into his studio] when I was in sixth grade. He has been fantastic, and I've loved every year I have been studying with him.

MT: Do you play any chamber music?

JT: Oh yes, I'm in the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra and they've got a chamber music program which I have been a part of for I think three years now. And that has been fun. You know, you just get together with friends who are equally interested in playing good classical music together. For the past few summers I have attended the Hotchkiss School, and they have a chamber music program which has also been a lot of fun. They bring in a whole bunch of very famous quartets that work with the students. So I have worked with the Orion and Miami Quartets, and others.

MT: I see that you have also worked with Ida Kavafrican.

JT: She was incredible. She performed with the student orchestra, and gave us some coachings. Just having her play when you are right there was amazing. We played *Summer* from the *Four Seasons*. She is such a dynamic player and is so much fun to watch and listen to.

MT: Well she's a dynamic person as well.

JT: Absolutely!

MT: Back to your orchestral performances, you have done quite a bit of soloing with orchestras.

JT: Yes, mostly as a result of various competitions and whatnot. But I, like most violinists, enjoy getting up there and soloing. It really is a thrill for me any chance I can get to do it. I mean I really do love performing, especially with orchestra.

MT: How many concerti do you have in your fingers?

JT: Lets see. Well I'm working on Tchaikovsky right now, but that is a constant work in process, as it will be into my late years I am sure. But I have played Dvorak with orchestra and I have Mendelssohn, Bruch, and Mozart 4, 5, and 2. I also have Kabalevsky. So I'm trying to grow the repertoire.

MT: You're a Junior at St. Ignatius?

JT: Yes.

MT: So you have one more year of High School. I take it that you plan on finishing rather than pursuing an alternative?

JT: [laughing] Oh yes, and that is not as crazy a question as it might sound!

MT: I'm very well aware of that. But with someone such as you, and I mean this with all sincerity, it must be very hard not to say, OK I'm going to finish my studies away and pursue a music career, and hope that St. Ignatius will allow me to graduate. And I'm making a big assumption that you plan to pursue music as a career.

JT: Yes I do, and I am looking forward to being in college, and being surrounded by people who are as interested in classical music as I am. Although I do love St. Ignatius, and it has been an excellent school for me. Especially when I first went there, and I truly wasn't sure if I would go the academic or music route. The academics there are great, and the school has given me many chances to perform for various events, like the annual Christmas concert at Severance Hall. I really do like the school, and next year I'll be getting a schedule that will allow me more to pursue the music. I'll have classes in the morning, up until lunch. After lunch I will have a few hours for practice and for composition.

MT: It's wonderful that St. Ignatius is being so accommodating. And that's right, you also compose. Do you also study composition?

JT: Yes, I study with Dr. Conner at CIM. I started as a Suzuki student, and of course, they start you off in theory class, and I've been studying theory ever since. That has transformed into part writing, and then into a composition class. I do enjoy composing, although it is often difficult to find time during the school day, with practicing and homework.

MT: I see in your resume that the Hotchkiss Chamber Choir performed one of your pieces.

JT: That was really fun; I took the text of Amazing Grace and set it to new music. It was actually the first time that I had had something performed by a full choir who were really good singers. So that was exciting. Also St. Ignatius asked me to write Curtain Music for the production of "The Importance of Being Earnest" which is a terrific play. It's a mock Victorian play, so I wrote some mock Victorian music. It was a lot of fun, and they let me record in the hall, so it was great.

MT: What music schools are you looking at? You don't have to answer if it will be uncomfortable for you.

JT: Oh no, because I am definitely looking at CIM, obviously, since Mr. Kantor is there. He is a terrific teacher and I have had a great working relationship with him for a long time. CIM will also allow me to get a double major, if I get accepted into both programs, in composition and violin performance. This is not possible at some of the other conservatories. Also CIM's emphasis on string chamber music and orchestral playing is something that appeals to me. And obviously staying in the Cleveland area would also be great, because I know a lot of people here, and getting wedding jobs and things like that, I think it will be helpful.

MT: That makes a lot of sense. Your resume also mentions that you perform as a liturgical musician every week. Do you play violin, piano, or...

JT: God forbid that I play the piano; I just stick to violin. But I do play at my church, Gesu Parish. It is sort of a fun release for me; I get to do a lot of improv stuff. I get the same book that the congregation does, and I'm told to make up a nice melody and or counter melody. I really enjoy it, especially because it gets me wedding jobs and holiday jobs. For Easter I played four masses during the course of that week.

MT: I find it interesting that more and more, young classical musicians are studying, and feeling comfortable improvising in performance. It was not always this way. In order to study improvisation you needed to be part of a jazz studies program or class.

JT: Yes, and I think that it is important. Especially for the “modern” player who is out of college and looking for jobs, you need to be as multifaceted as you can. I mean it’s fun to do, too. But I’m sure there are some classical musicians who might think that music is not worthy of being played because it is not Brahms or Beethoven, But I really enjoy it. You can also meet a whole new group of people who play a whole new style of music, which is a lot of fun.

MT: That’s really great to hear you say this. So what are your plans for the summer?

JT: This summer, well it’s going to be six weeks of summer Health class.

MT: OH NO!

JT: [Laughing] Yes, as a condition of St. Ignatius giving me my “dream schedule” for next year, they said that I had to get this class out of the way early. I actually think it will be nice, because it is one thing to go to a camp during the summer and play a lot of chamber music and orchestral music, but to have the chance this summer to be able to spend a lot of time really working on technique and not feeling the pressure of having to perform all the time, I will be able to sit back and practice all of the nitty-gritty stuff without compromising a performance. It will be a nice break.

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In addition to the Violin Concerto #5 in A major K 219, “Turkish” of Mozart, the program also includes the Hebrides Overture of Mendelssohn, and the Symphony #2 in D major, opus #36 of Beethoven. The program will be conducted by Blue Water Chamber Orchestra’s Artistic Director, Carlton R. Woods, and Neil Mueller, Associate Artistic Director. For ticket information please visit the Breen Center [Web site](#) or call 216-961-2560.

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