

Feature**A conversation with conductor Jahja Ling**

By Mike Telin



For many of us it is difficult to remember a time when conductor Jahja Ling has not been, in some fashion, associated with The Cleveland Orchestra. Ling first served as Associate Conductor during the 1984-85 season, and then as Resident Conductor from 1985-2002. He also served as the director of the Blossom Festival for 6 seasons. Since then he has continued to appear as guest conductor, and this year marks the twenty-eighth anniversary of his continuous relationship with The Cleveland Orchestra.

This summer Jahja Ling will conduct three performances at Blossom Music Center including the July 3 performance featuring works by Bernstein, Grofé, Rogers, and Gershwin with pianist Inon Barnatan. On Saturday, July 7, Ling will lead the Orchestra and pianist Emanuel Ax in works by Mozart, Suppé, Chopin and Brahms. On July 27th Ling will conduct the final round of the Oberlin

Cooper Competition at Severance Hall and on the 28th will return to the Blossom stage for the annual side-by-side Cleveland Orchestra and Kent/Blossom Chamber Orchestra concert.

We spoke to Jahja Ling on Monday by telephone shortly after the conclusion of the rehearsal for that evening's annual Public Square Star-Spangled Spectacular, and we began by congratulating him on his twenty-eight continuous seasons.

Jahja Ling: Yes, twenty-eight continuous seasons with the Cleveland Orchestra. I have been here since 1984 and I have never stopped conducting this orchestra.

Mike Telin: This is a two part question: did you ever think your relationship with The Cleveland Orchestra would last this long; and what about the relationship keeps you coming back?

JL: First I would not have ever dreamed that when I came as a student from Jakarta to study piano at Juilliard that all this would happen. Yesterday when I arrived at the hotel and saw the rapid trains at Terminal Tower, I remembered that in 1972 I came here to visit a friend at Oberlin and I took the rapid from the airport to Cleveland for the first

time. At Terminal Tower I asked somebody if they could tell me how to get to Severance Hall. I really wanted to see Severance Hall because I used to hear all the Cleveland Orchestra recordings when I was young. I listened to all of the Szell recordings, especially the ones with Leon Fleischer, because I was a pianist, and Fleischer was my idol. Then of course the recordings with Rudolph Serkin.

I wanted to see Severance Hall but the bus driver couldn't tell me how to get there, and I was so disappointed. Then, low and behold, in 1984 I was invited to come here as an associate conductor, then I made that surprise debut, and right away they promoted me to resident conductor in 1985, and I stayed until 2002. I was resident conductor for 17 years. I actually came and left with Dohnányi.

MT: You also served as director of the Blossom Festival.

JL: Yes, in 2000 I was appointed director of the Blossom Festival, and that was the first time a staff conductor had been appointed to that position; I was very honored and privileged. I remember that we did a lot of great programs; a couple scenes from *Rosenkavalier* with Barbara Bonney, the two Brahms piano concertos with Bronfman in one weekend, and the five Mozart violin concertos with Frank Peter Zimmerman. We also did the Verdi and Brahms *Requiems*, all the great music and I was so happy. It was a three year contract, but when Franz Wesler-Möst came he extended it for another three years. So even though I had left as the resident conductor, I still came back as festival director for three more years.

Then in 2003 I got the job in San Diego, but even though I have left the positions here, I still keep coming back every season. So now, before I knew it, it's been 28 years. I think I have the record for the longest association with one orchestra. And now this summer I'm conducting five different programs.

MT: Tonight you're conducting the annual concert on Public Square.

JL: Actually I started the concerts at Public Square and I think I have conducted them fifteen times. I also conducted a concert for the opening of Jacobs Field, but of course it's Progressive Field now, and I conducted the bi-centennial concert in the Flats.

MT: You also conducted the National Anthem with Whitney Houston.

JL: I conducted *The Star Spangled Banner* with the Florida Orchestra and Whitney Houston for Super Bowl 25, in 1991. We recorded it and that record went platinum, and it's still getting played; even more now that Whitney just passed away.

MT: This is amazing. I wish everyone could hear the excitement in your voice right now. What is it about these big public events that you like? I mean many conductors get to a point in their careers where they no longer want to involve themselves in these kind of things.

JL: I look at it like this, if you give a concert at Severance Hall, and if you sell out it's about 2,000 seats, right? The first time I conducted the Public Square concert, eighty

thousand people showed up. So that means you would need to play forty sold out concerts in Severance Hall to reach that many people. For the Bi-centennial concert two hundred thousand people showed up, so that means you'd have to play one hundred sold out concerts at Severance Hall to get that many people to hear the orchestra at Severance Hall. So I think to play in Public Square you can reach out to so many more people. This concert belongs to the community, and people can enjoy a great orchestra in Public Square to celebrate Independence Day every year, so these concerts are very special. There is a tremendous feeling at the concerts as well, and I am sure that people are still excited.

MT: Tomorrow night you open the Blossom season with pianist Inon Barnatan performing Rhapsody in Blue.

JL: I just did this In Berlin, and Herbie Hancock and Lang Lang performed a two piano version, where they interchanged and improvised the parts, it was great but I'm looking forward to the [traditional] version again.

MT: And on Saturday you'll be conducting another concert with Emanuel Ax as soloist.

JL: Emanuel Ax has been one of my closest friends. We studied with the same teacher at Juilliard, Mieczyslaw Munz, so we've known each other over 42 years, and of course we have collaborated so many times. He really is one of the great artists and musicians of our time.

MT: And you're back on the 28th for the Kent Blossom side-by-side concert.

JL: I'm conducting all Beethoven: *Overture to Coriolan*, and the violin concerto with Gil Shaham. James Feddeck is conducting something with the Kent Blossom Orchestra, then we will combine for the Beethoven's 5th Symphony. The night before I'm conducting the finals of the Oberlin Cooper Competition with The Cleveland Orchestra at Severance Hall.

MT: You have always been dedicated to young people, and you are the founding Music Director of the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra.

JL: Yes and I was so excited to hear that they just had a great and successful tour. That is fantastic, and as the founding music director it makes me very happy. Anything I can contribute to youth like introducing them to music and bringing them to a higher standard, like playing the side by side with the Cleveland Orchestra is great. It's wonderful to be able to pass on the tradition.

MT: I spoke to last years Cooper Competition winner, Serena Huang and she spoke so highly of you and said how much you put her at ease. What do you tell very young soloists?

JL: Well, I say, look, you want to make music to its fullest; don't worry about [little things]. I tell them we are here to support you. We are here to make music together. I give them support, not only during the orchestra rehearsal but also during the piano rehearsal.

I try to give them some tips about how to play with an orchestra, because these young people don't play with an orchestra very often. Maybe they have played with a community, student or youth orchestra, but to play with The Cleveland Orchestra you need to have the confidence just to be on that stage, and it can be nerve wracking. So I try to tell them, you make music and I'll be with you, I'll watch you and we'll work together.

I'll say watch for this part because you are not playing a solo there you are playing an accompanying line with the clarinet or the horn. So I try to point out what they should listen to. This is something that is lacking in their education, because of course all the soloists teachers want the students to be great soloists. But sometimes they don't teach enough about how to collaborate, like playing chamber music or playing with the orchestra, because playing with the orchestra is about collaboration, it's not just the orchestra accompanying you, but sometimes you are accompanying the orchestra. Like when you play a big concerto like the Brahms violin and piano concertos; it's a symphony, it's not really a concerto. So you have to be able to hear what's going on in the orchestra in order to be able to achieve the highest level of music making.

MT: Final question: you are a very fine pianist; how being a pianist informed your conducting?

JL: I am a pianist, and have competed in International Competitions like the Tchaikovsky and Rubenstein, and I have performed with major orchestras — in fact I played with The Cleveland Orchestra several times. That's why a lot of my colleagues like Emanuel Ax, Yefim Bronfman, Radu Lupu, or Garrick Ohlsson love to collaborate because they know that I am a pianist, and I know the piano part well, and so I can lead the orchestra according to their interpretation because everyone has their own visions for a piece.

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