

Elgar and lager, regal and large

Joshua Roman looks forward to beer and romance

By LAWRENCE COSENTINO

In a charming, off-the-cuff YouTube series, Joshua Roman parks his chair, himself and his cello in alleys, gardens, parks and rooftops of cities he's touring — from

Masterworks 2: Elgar & Rachmaninoff

Lansing Symphony Orchestra
With Joshua Roman, cello

8 p.m. Friday, Oct. 9
Wharton Center
Cobb Great Hall
Tickets start at \$20
(517) 487-5001,
lansingsymphony.org

Sri Lanka to New York to Bellingham, Wash. — and conjures a little bit of contrapuntal magic from one of Bach's solo sonatas and partitas.

Roman isn't sure if he'll drop a Bach bomb in Greater Lansing, where he's set to play Edward Elgar's magisterial Cello Concerto with the Lansing Symphony Orchestra Friday.

"It depends on the weather and how much time I have," he said.

He seems to be setting aside time for other things.

"I notice there's some sort of a brewery scene happening in Lansing," he said. "I'm excited about that."

Roman stands out among the rising stars the Lansing Symphony has snagged in recent years. At 31, he's pretty much risen by now — and he's already restless with the

view from the top.

In 2006, at 22, he became the principal cellist of the Seattle Symphony, the youngest principal in the symphony's history.

Since he went off on his solo career in 2008, he's gotten gigs with some of the world's top orchestras, including the San Francisco Symphony, Los Angeles Philharmonic and Mariinsky Theatre Orchestra in St. Petersburg, Russia. Several top composers, including Aaron Jay Kernis and Mason Bates, have dedicated new concerti to him.

The steep, but well-worn career path of the classical cellist isn't enough to satisfy him.

"He's the model of the 21st century musician," said Timothy Muffitt, Lansing Symphony conductor and music director. "He's involved in new ways of packaging classical music. He's been taking great music into unusual places, and he's an extraordinary cellist."

Besides his solo gigs and YouTube adventures, Roman directs Seattle's TownMusic, an eclectic concert series that thrives on world premieres and cross-collaborations with non-classical musicians. He recently started composing and just finished a cello concerto of his own. Roman's blog avoids the usual PR blather and delves into his performing and composing life with disarming honesty.

With all that going on, playing Elgar seems like a retrograde gig for Roman. The concerto may be the most beloved in the repertoire, but it was already dismissed as old-fashioned when it was written in 1919.

Roman doesn't see it that way.

"For me, it's important to recognize great music, wherever it comes," he said.

He's been thinking a lot lately about the tug of war between musical camps — one



Photo by Jeremy Sawatzky
Cellist Joshua Roman performs Friday as a featured soloist with the Lansing Symphony Orchestra.

side urging fidelity to "the greats" and the other pushing for new music.

"Recently there's been more awareness that that's not necessary," he said. "You can have all of that together and it's a much richer musical journey."

The Elgar concerto promises to nestle nicely with Sergei Rachmaninoff's Second Symphony, the other big piece on Friday's program. There will be a lot of gorgeous melodies, but the turmoil of the early 20th century lurks under the lavish veil.

"Elgar and Rachmaninoff are two romantic composers operating in a time of great revolution in music," Muffitt said. "We hear that in both of them. Even Rachmaninoff, whom no one really thinks of as an innovator, was informed by what was happening in music and it makes its way in."

Roman agrees with Muffitt that a lot of

inner struggle is tucked into Elgar's cushion of music.

"In some ways, it's actually easier to express turmoil and angst because you have clearly defined boundaries you push against," Roman said.

Recently, the high-energy duo 2Cellos (who came to Wharton Center in February) have taken Roman's instrument into arena-rock levels of amplification and light-show overkill. Roman isn't interested in slapping them down.

"2Cellos is a unique moment in classical music, culture and YouTube," he said. "It's fun. I love the energy that would drive someone to be creative and put it out there, and I love it that there is a response."

Apparently, Roman's 21st-century skill set includes a deft touch for diplomacy.

Get the man a beer.