

THINGS TO DO

## Guest conductor promises depth and death in ASO program

Macon native Roderick Cox drew from his childhood imagination and reading about the Greek gods to prepare for leading Atlanta Symphony Orchestra program



Credit: Photo by Rand Lines



By Jordan Owen - ArtsATL

16 hours ago



*This story was originally published by ArtsATL.*

On Thursday and Saturday, Oct. 24 and 26, Roderick Cox will conduct the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. It's a familiar podium for the fiery young guest conductor and an opportunity to delve into an evening of profound emotional depth that features John Adams' "Doctor Atomic Symphony" and works by Samuel Barber and Sergei Rachmaninoff.

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hectic conducting schedule.

“I was with the Philadelphia Orchestra last week,” he explains. “I really needed the break, so I’m taking a little downtime before heading to Atlanta.”



Credit: Photo by Kopie

Roderick Cox conducts the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra on Thursday and Saturday, Oct. 24 and 26.

It was in Macon that Cox developed a childhood fascination with music, beginning with the gospel music of his church life. Soon he was conducting an orchestra composed entirely of



the mind. Action figures gave way to a love of Greek mythology, thanks to the Kevin Sorbo television series “Hercules: The Legendary Journeys” and its spinoff, “Xena: Warrior Princess.”

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Cox speaks enthusiastically about his multicultural studies and world history classes. Still, in a childhood that predated today’s deluge of streaming content, it was his own reading that motivated him the most. “I was rather a nerd in this way,” he recalls. “I would scroll through my encyclopedias and learn about all the different Greek gods.”

Cox says that developing his imagination was a crucial component of his growth as a conductor. “It’s really helpful for going into a world of creating and imagining massive scores,” he explains. “I pride myself on this part of my childhood, where I could be alone in my own world.”

That cerebral bent is reflected in Cox’s programming selections for the ASO concerts. The orchestra was interested in performing “Doctor Atomic Symphony,” an instrumental reworking of John Adams’ apocalyptic opera on the life and times of J. Robert Oppenheimer, father of the atomic bomb. For Cox, the piece spoke to the dual nature of the human drive toward both innovation and annihilation.

“This piece is about a massive amount of human destruction,” says Cox. “But it follows the timeline of these scientists and the brilliant people grappling with the moral and ethical dilemma of developing this weapon and predicting how it would change mankind forever.”

That ominous tone gave Cox a lead on how to arrange the rest of the evening’s program. “It came down to what to pair it with,” he explains. “I think it’s quite interesting that we’re living during a time where we’re seeing war and conflict and how little we’ve learned over time. The devaluing of life is all the more present.”



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“He was always very much fascinated with this idea of death and quotes the ‘Dies Irae,’ a medieval Latin poem that describes the Last Judgment and is used in the Roman Catholic funeral mass.

Cox says the larger implication of the piece is that it was written as Rachmaninoff was looking back at his own life and accomplishments. Cox programmed the work so the second half of the evening’s program would deal with natural death in contrast to “Doctor Atomic’s” brutal visions of death caused by destruction and warfare

For the opener, Cox chose Samuel Barber’s “Adagio for Strings,” the mournful meditation well-known for its iconic appearance in Oliver Stone’s classic war film “Platoon.” “Even though



In addition to its use in “Platoon,” the piece was featured at the memorial ceremonies of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and other prominent figures. As such, it has profound connections to the experience of loss and grief. “I thought it was a beautiful way to clear the palette and prepare the audience’s minds for the experience of ‘Doctor Atomic,’” Cox says.

Like Oppenheimer, Cox is a man of the mind. While one man set in motion the dropping of the atomic bomb, the other prepares to unleash a musical echo of those harrowing events, buttressed by other beautiful meditations on grief and death.

As he prepares to conduct such a program, Cox returns to the rich landscape of his imagination. “I really try to think of the sound world. How do you put a piece into motion from absolute silence?”

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## CONCERT PREVIEW

### **Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Roderick Cox**

8 p.m. Thursday and Saturday, Oct. 24 and 26. \$29-\$119. Symphony Hall, 1280 Peachtree St. NE, Atlanta. 404-733-4800, [aso.org](http://aso.org)

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*Jordan Owen began writing about music professionally at the age of 16 in Oxford, Mississippi. A 2006 graduate of the Berklee College of Music, he is a professional guitarist, bandleader and composer. He is the lead guitarist for the jazz group Other Strangers, the power metal band Axis of Empires and the melodic death/thrash metal band Century Spawn.*

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**Jordan Owen**

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