

# The Post and Courier

## Classical music offerings the core of Spoleto Festival



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The Bank of America Chamber Music series is a cornerstone of Spoleto Festival USA. Directed by Geoff Nuttall, it offers two concerts each day of the festival at the historic Dock Street Theatre. WILLIAM STRUHS

The variety of programming offered by Spoleto Festival is remarkable, and in recent years it's included more physical theater and popular music shows. Among its cornerstone presentations are the Wells Fargo Jazz series, organized by Michael Grofsorean; the dance and theater productions; and the garden tours.

But at its core, Spoleto Festival is showcase of classical music: operatic, choral, contemporary, orchestral, chamber and experimental.

Patrons naturally are seduced by the innovative and often riveting large-scale opera productions and orchestra concerts, but it's the Bank of America Chamber Music series — 11 separate programs that run about 1 hour and 15 minutes, presented three times each — that boasts the most dedicated and enthusiastic audiences. This is the case year after year. It was so when Charles Wadsworth ran the series, and it is true now that Geoff Nutall, a violinist and member of the St. Lawrence String Quartet, is in charge.

Twice each day of the festival, the Dock Street Theatre fills up with people eager to hear whatever happens to be in store for them. Nutall describes the program, with wit and charm, from the stage. And then the players, many of whom are festival regulars, surprise, enchant, horrify and awe their rapt listeners. They can really do no wrong.

Elliot Carter? No problem. A new work by composer-in-residence Mark Applebaum? Bring it on.

Each year, the chamber music series becomes a self-contained festival within the festival, sufficient all by itself to satisfy anyone hungry for good music performed well. Its nourishment sustains many of its enthusiastic patrons for a full year, not unlike how a bear's gorging on salmon keeps him secure through his long winter sleep.

The Music in Time series of contemporary music functions in a similar fashion. It provides both the connoisseur and the merely curious with a healthy dose of new classical works performed with enthusiasm. Unlike the bear's salmon feast, these programs don't tend to engender sleep. Rather, they open one's eyes wide to the wonders of human creativity.

This year, the music of Chinese composer Huang Ruo and German composer Hans Otte will be presented, along with Charles Ives' transcendental Concord Sonata. The series inhabits two venues this time, its usual Simons Center Recital Hall as well as the Woolfe Street Playhouse where The Living Earth Show, an electric guitar-percussion duo from San Francisco, will shred quartertones and double your happiness.

John Kennedy, resident conductor and director of orchestral activities, is the force behind Music in Time. Kennedy said he's glad the series permits the extraordinary pianist Conor Hanick to spread his wings and gives the Living Earth Show the stage for two performances.

"They are representative of the zeitgeist in new music," bending and blending classical music with the vernacular, he said. "Genre is something that's very elastic."

The always impressive Westminster Choir will offer three concerts arguably as important and ambitious as any these young singers have ever done. The first is the purest, consisting only of the choir, led by Joe Miller. They will present a program of music by Urmias Sisask, Eric Whitacre and Claudio Monteverdi at the Cathedral Church of St. Luke and St. Paul.

Then the choir will join forces with choreographer Pontus Lidberg for a rendition of David Lang's Pulitzer Prize-winning "The Little Match Girl Passion" at the Sottile Theatre. Also on the program is Giacomo Carissimi's "Jephte."

The Westminster Choir, joined by the Taylor Festival Choir and musicians from New York Baroque, will present on June 3 Bach's St. Matthew's Passion, arguably the granddaddy of all choral masterworks (and a pretty big deal for the festival).

If symphonies are your preference, consider attending the Spoleto Festival Orchestra concert on May 26 at the Sottile Theatre. You'll hear Tan Dun's innovative Concerto for Orchestra; Samuel Barber's glorious "Knoxville: Summer of 1915," featuring soprano Alyson Cambridge; and Jean Sibelius' grand Symphony No. 5.

The young players of the impressive Spoleto Festival Orchestra won't be accompanying the operas this year and won't have use of the new Gaillard Concert Hall just yet, so Kennedy is having them play some film music at the Sottile Theatre (an old movie house) instead. William Eddins will conduct the group as Charlie Chaplin's classic "City Lights" flickers on screen (5 p.m. Monday), and Kennedy will lead the band in a performance of music by Michael Gordon meant to accompany Bill Morrison's "Decasia," an adventurous meditation on the age of silent films (8 p.m. June 1).

Finally, the classical music offerings include two operas, one that's very old — "Veremonda, L'Amazzone di Aragona" by Francesco Cavalli — but includes some very modern themes and ideas; and one that's very new — "Paradise Interrupted" by Huang Ruo — but harkens back 600 years or so to the Ming Dynasty.

"Veremonda" has been a real discovery, according to Spoleto Festival General Director Nigel Redden and Stefano Vizioli, who is directing the production. It's required a lot of effort to piece the opera back together after it's 350-year hibernation. And it's "a wonderful, preposterous story," Redden said.

"Paradise Interrupted" sprung from an idea of Jennifer Wen Ma, who co-wrote the libretto, designed the production and is directing. Wen Ma went to composer Huang Ruo, and Ruo went to his manuscript paper to create an intriguing musical hybrid that represents Chinese culture in a western context.

"Chinese music is so old, and the country was closed for so long, we've had less exposure to it than seems right for such a rich culture," Redden said.

All of Spoleto Festival's diverse classical music programming, whether choral, chamber or contemporary, has something in common: it pushes the envelope. For this is spring in Charleston, time to revel in the unfamiliar and test our prowess at riding these big musical waves rolling through town. Now is your chance.

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