

The News Tribune

Music to your ears

Classical show of talent: Three chamber music events scheduled at University of Puget Sound this month

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September can be a lean month for classical music – but the University of Puget Sound is stepping into the breach with gusto, supplying Tacoma with three chamber music concerts during the next three Friday evenings that celebrate the rich talent in the school's music department.

From British composer William Walton to violin virtuosity with a free musical collage in the middle, September's three concerts highlight the impressive skill and out-of-the-box programming of the school's faculty and students.

WALTON'S JEKYLL-AND-HYDE

Tonight at Schneebeck Hall, in what may be a first for Tacoma, is a program entirely devoted to William Walton. If you just thought, "Who?" then you're not alone. Walton, an early 20th-century English composer, isn't a big feature on classical programs these days, despite a few popular works such as the lyrical Viola Concerto and the choral staple "Belshazzar's Feast." But though his later work is neo-Romantic, he started off as an angular modernist with a piece that's rarely heard but will be played tonight: "Faade."

"I like to think of it as the first recorded piece of rap music – only it was written in the 1920s," said Fred Winkler, the saxophonist and UPS affiliate artist who organized the Walton concert – the first in the university's annual Jacobsen Series – and who'll also be playing in "Faade." "It's such a unique piece."

Unique indeed: "Faade: An Entertainment" was scored not just for an odd combination of instruments (flute/piccolo, clarinet/bass clarinet, alto sax, trumpet, percussion and cello) but spoken voice as well. Over the sparse, sometimes bizarre musical lines is read semi-nonsense poetry written by Walton's friend and mentor Edith Sitwell, who in the original 1929 recording maintains a monotone sing-song that's rather like upper-class English rap.

"Sitwell was the original Lady Gaga," Winkler said.

"Faade" scandalized audiences at its premier – Noel Coward famously marched out during the performance – and Winkler describes it as "akin to strange and colorful dreams that range from the nonsensical and silly to the ghostly sublime." Soprano Dawn Padula will speak the vocal part.

Like Mr. Hyde to Dr. Jekyll, though, the first half of the Jacobsen concert shows Walton's other compositional side: the serious solemnity of his string quartet in A minor.

Written very late in Walton's life, the work combines "the romantic lines of Brahms with the impressionistic colors of Debussy and the cinematic feel of Korngold," said UPS associate violin professor Maria Sampen, who'll play it tonight. "It's not done much, so it's a real treat to hear it."

FAST-PACED MUSICAL 'COLLAGE'

Sampen also is involved in the Sept. 21 concert. Titled “Collage,” the 90-minute free performance is an idea that Sampen and her violist husband (and UPS colleague) Tim Christie created for their summer chamber music festival in Walla Walla. Informal and innovative, the program juxtaposes short pieces or segments from a huge variety of genres and instrumentation played in quick succession from different parts of the hall around the audience.

In next week’s concert, for instance, you might hear five minutes of a cello trio, Sampen said, followed by a jazz work and then a vocal group. There’ll be music from baroque to modern, and even a segment of a new musical theater work written this summer by piano professor Duane Hulbert. Faculty and students share the stage to perform: an element Sampen really likes.

“It’s a really cool event,” said the violinist, “and a great way for the community to hear all the different things that go on in the School of Music. It was packed last year.”

VIOLIN VIRTUOSITY

For the final Jacobsen concert of the month, Sampen steps into the spotlight for a star role in a violin recital programmed to show off the virtuosity and versatility of the instrument. The program ranges from Ravel’s passionate “Tzigane” (“it’s very evocative, showing the gypsy heritage of the violin,” Sampen said) through the lyrical Sonata No. 3 of Brahms to Sarasate’s Spanish firework showcase “Navarra,” which pits two violins against one another. “Appassionato” promises to live up to its name.

“The Brahms is one of the instrument’s staples,” added Sampen, “showing how it can sing with those gorgeous melodies. The Sarasate is fun and perhaps a bit silly, but it shows off the competitive nature of violinists – you get to hear arpeggios up and down the strings, harmonics, really low notes, left-hand pizzicato, double and triple stops, the works.”

What makes this Sarasate even more interesting is that Sampen’s dueling partner will be her husband, Tim, who also plays violin.

“We both win,” Sampen said, diplomatically, of the musical “competition.”

The program ends with the all-string celebration of Dvork’s Piano Quartet in E-flat major Op. 87, a lush work with plenty of the composer’s Eastern European folk-dance influence.

For Winkler, the two Jacobsen concerts and free “Collage” are good examples of how universities can contribute creativity to a city’s musical scene.

“It’s like university life in general,” he said. “You can bring in new ideas outside the box that wouldn’t be met commercially.”

But the other big benefit of these three concerts, Winkler said, is simply to showcase the wealth of talent in the University of Puget Sound’s department of music.

“It’ll be a treat,” he said.

Concerts

What: “The Two Faces of William Walton”

Who: Various UPS faculty

When: 7:30 tonight

Where: Schneebeck Concert Hall, University of Puget Sound, 1500 N. Warner St., Tacoma

Tickets: \$12.50/\$8.50/free for UPS students

Information: 253-879-3100, tickets.pugetsound.edu (<http://tickets.pugetsound.edu>)

What: “Collage”

Who: UPS faculty and students

When: 7:30 p.m. Sept. 21

Where: Schneebeck Concert Hall, University of Puget Sound, 1500 N. Warner St., Tacoma

Tickets: Free

Information: 253-879-3100, tickets.pugetsound.edu (<http://tickets.pugetsound.edu>)

What: “Appassionato” violin concert

Who: Maria Sampen, violin, with Tim Christie (viola), David Requiro (cello) and Duane Hulbert (piano)

When: 7:30 p.m. Sept. 28

Where: Schneebeck Concert Hall, University of Puget Sound, 1500 N. Warner St., Tacoma

Tickets: \$12.50/\$8.50/free for UPS students

Information: 253-879-3100

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