

A concerted effort: Ukiah Symphony plays broad-based array of concertos

By Roberta Werdinger

On Saturday, January 27 at 8 p.m. and Sunday, January 28 at 3 p.m., the Ukiah Symphony under the direction of Les Pfitzenreuter and in collaboration with Mendocino College will present "Concerto, Concerto!" Featuring the debut of an original composition by Joe Nemeth with Elizabeth MacDougall on piano; Antonio Vivaldi's Concerto for 2 Horns and Strings with Randy Masselink and John Lounsbery on French horns; Alexander Arutunian's Trumpet Concerto in A-flat Major with Landon Gray on trumpet; and concluding with a sampling of certified "scary music," this broad-based array of concertos and other symphonic pieces highlights the expressive possibilities of the classical tradition as it continues to this day.

Early days of the concerto

A concerto is defined by the Encyclopedia Britannica as "a musical composition for instruments in which a solo instrument is set off against an orchestral ensemble." Originating in Italy in the late 16th century, it encouraged virtuosity of playing in the solo instrument featured, which could be violin, cello, a woodwind, or almost any instrument in the orchestra. The word originates from the Italian word *concertare*, meaning "harmonize," yet it also relates to the Latin word *contendere*, "to contend." In a sense, a concerto unites both of those meanings, demonstrating how a solo player may divide off from the group to make a singular statement--to contend, if you will--while then joining back with the group "in concert."

One of the most important composers to develop the concerto form was Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741). The Venice native was ordained as a priest as a young man, but his heart was with music. (With his distinctive red hair, he was nicknamed "The Red Priest.") He soon switched to composing and teaching the violin. Prolific and successful, he composed many concertos including The Four Seasons, becoming a key cultural figure of the Baroque era and influencing other major musicians, including his contemporary Johann Sebastian Bach. In spite of his considerable achievements his reputation declined in his later life and he died in poverty. Vivaldi wrote some 460 concertos, more than 300 of which are for solo or twinned instruments. Most of these are for violin, his own instrument; the Vivaldi concerto on the program is one of only two written for dual horns. Randy Masselink, who with friend and fellow musician John Lounsbery will be playing the horn solos, describes the piece as "a non-complicated, unpretentious 'shower' of color, due certainly in part to the technical limitations of the hand horn, but also, given those limitations, a tribute to a real master composer." (The hand horn is the predecessor of the modern horn, without valves and thus requiring the player to alter the pitch of certain notes by varying the hand position inside the bell of the horn.)

20th-century developments

As the concerto form made its way through time, it crossed continents and was adapted into many cultures. The Armenian-Russian composer Alexander Arutunian, who lived from 1920 to 2012, helped bring the concerto into the 20th century with his own unique flourish. Born and raised in Armenia, a culturally distinct and now independent republic on the western edge of the Asian continent, he was educated in Moscow and returned to Armenia to teach and compose while it was under the auspices of the Soviet republic. His 1950 Trumpet Concerto in A-flat Major is his most well-known work. Consisting of five movements, the concerto reflects Arutunian's roots in Armenian folk music. As the featured instrument, the trumpet is heard both on its own and in concert with the orchestra as the concerto travels through almost every facet of the instrument, from bold and declarative to subdued and reflective.

To play the concerto, orchestra director Les Pfitzenreuter invited a young trumpet player he had heard in Santa Rosa, Landon Gray, to come up north to play with the Ukiah Symphony. Gray is a Santa Rosa native now based in the state of New York. He has traveled and performed widely for his trumpet performances, moving easily between jazz, musical theatre, and classical music. Of the Arutunian piece, he comments, "I love playing

this concerto because it crosses such a variety of musical styles and has so much for a listener to enjoy. The dramatic opera-like opening is so full and demanding of attention, yet soon the music turns to a more playful route. The variety of colors and melodies explored is truly delightful."

A contemporary concerto

The program will also feature the debut performance of Joseph Nemeth's Piano Concerto in F Minor, with Elizabeth MacDougall in the featured piano role. Nemeth is a recent arrival in Ukiah, where he works as a software developer. The Rocky Mountains native began writing the concerto during a dark period in his life in 1986, finally completing it in 2003. "Writing it, dreaming it, listening to it, was like the balloon that held me up," Nemeth says of the piece, adding that in spite of its dark circumstances, "I think it's a very joyful piece." Alternating between the full orchestral ensemble and highlighting various instruments, with the piano present throughout, the concerto flows through a remarkable range of emotions, from sober melancholy to infectious joy.

MacDougall herself is no stranger to Ukiah audiences, being a fixture and an important asset in the local music scene. The Ukiah native has been playing with the orchestra for well over twenty years; she now teaches privately and at Mendocino College, and performs regularly. She credits her musical family with helping her get started: her great-grandfather was an orchestra director, and she started playing piano at the age of seven. After rehearsing the Nemeth piece for almost a year, she reflects that "It's like a late Romantic concerto: some of it is very danceable, some of it sounds like a Chopin etude."

... and finally, scary tone poems

The second part of the program features pieces by four 19th-century composers, described by conductor Pfitzenreuter as "scary tone poems." For any listener who has doubted whether music could change their mood or even raise their pulse, this is a good chance to find out. Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg's "In the Hall of the Mountain King" is a textbook case in how to use accelerating tempo, plucked violins and staccato rhythms to create suspense. Camille Saint-Saens's "Danse Macabre" features musical phrases which creep up on the listener like an ambush, as well as dark, intense swells of sound punctuated by drumrolls. Richard Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries" is a rousing, anthemic piece making full and florid use of horns, cymbals, and swirling violins; taken from one of Wagner's operas, it is meant to capture the sound of mythical warrior maidens returning from battle. Modest Mussorgsky's "Night on Bald Mountain" creates a narrative effect as various orchestral sections play against each other, with phrases suggesting anger, fear, doubt and triumph in turn and then all at once. The Russian composer originally wrote the composition in 1867 to depict a witches' sabbath; it was later featured in the classic 1940 Walt Disney animated film "Fantasia."

Altogether, this abundant and varied program will be the perfect formula to chase the winter blues away. Joe Nemeth comments, "There are three components to a successful piece of music: composer, performer, and audience. All three are putting in equal amounts of energy," pointing to an interaction that is often not thought about when attention goes to the music or the musicians alone. The concerto form is still winding its way through history, and is waiting for new pairs of ears in a new audience to make it complete.

"Concerto, Concerto!" will be held at the Mendocino College Theatre on January 27 at 8 p.m. and January 28 at 3 p.m. Tickets are \$25 adults, \$20 seniors 65 and up, and free for youth under 18 and students with ASB cards. Tickets may be purchased at the Mendocino Book Company, 102 S. School Street in Ukiah; Mail Center, Etc., 207-A N. Cloverdale Blvd. in Cloverdale; and online at www.ukiahsymphony.org. Anyone who has lost their home, business or family members in the recent October fires will be admitted for free at the door.

The concert is sponsored by Robert Axt, Rich and Jean Craig, Savings Bank of Mendocino County, Jaye Alison Moscarriello and Bill Taylor. For more information, call the Ukiah Symphony at 707 462-0236.