



Punta Gorda Symphony Presents Strings on the Lawn: From Bach to Broadway

Rating 5/5

It was a perfect Florida winter day, about 80 degrees, low humidity, sunny, with a beautiful light breeze. As patrons assembled and musicians prepared for the concert, birds chirped, welcoming everyone from the gently swaying trees. The program began with a greeting and introduction from orchestra conductor and director Maestro Raffaele Livio Ponti. This event was held on the Florida Southwestern State College Charlotte Campus lawn by the auditorium.



L-R. Violinists Ming Gao, Gregg Anderson, and Cellist Si-Cheng Liu. Photo: Edward A. Kliszus.

For good reason, outdoor concerts are popular worldwide for all types of music and evoke fond memories for those fortunate enough to attend. One recalls the Woodstock Festival of 1969, the annual Nice Jazz Festival, or Vienna Philharmonic concerts at Vienna's Schönbrunn Palace, which housed the summer residence of the Habsburgs. *Schönbrunn* means "beautiful spring."

Orchestra concertmaster Ming Gao, fellow violinist Gregg Anderson, cellist Si-Cheng Liu, and pianist Charis Dimaras entered the stage platform to perform music arranged for a chamber music ensemble. Chamber music is unique and essential, and it intimately highlights the personalities and proficiency of the musicians while providing insightful musical experiences for musicians and



The audience is set. Photo credit: E. Kliszus

audiences alike. Chamber music experiences serve musicians well, providing a venue to both showcase and hone their musical skills in an influential medium for musical expression where every nuance is articulated. Reflect, for example, on the string quartet. This ensemble represents a harmonic microcosm of a full symphony orchestra performed by just four players, two violins, viola, and cello. It has been said that the string quartets of Beethoven form, using a biblical metaphor, the "Old Testament," while the string quartets of Bartok form the "New Testament" of quartets. Chamber music is mighty indeed.

Today the audience was treated to a series of works spanning from the Renaissance to modern musical theater. An affable Ming Gao eloquently introduced each piece, describing its characteristics, features, and

biographical context. He also drew amusing attention to things like the foot-long clothespins used to keep music safely on music stands, a necessary prop for breezy outdoor venues.

The first selection comprised two movements from J. S. Bach's Concerto for Two Violins in D minor, BWV 1043, the *Vivace*, and *Allegro*. It's notable that during this era of composition, a movement of a musical work, as in the spirit of *Affektenlehre*, represents a singular human emotion. You may recall the work of René Descartes when around 1650, he defined six primary affects expressed in art. They include admiration, love, hatred, desire, joy, and sorrow. In the Bach, one certainly experienced admiration and joy.

The following work entitled Fandango is by contemporary American composer Michael Mclean. It began with the cello passionately setting the mood for the excitement of the famous fandango dance from Spain. This segued into the festive, triple-meter dance set in a classic style. One imagines castanets and guitars driving the rhythm and passion of the song.

Gao noted that Dmitri Shostakovich's work, Four Pieces for Two Violins and Piano, represents a departure from what we generally expect from Shostakovich. Political and social theory has clearly played a dominant role in analyzing his work, and some describe his music as a chapter from Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*. He once stated, "I am a Soviet composer, and I see our epoch as something heroic, spirited, and joyous." These pieces are a collection of music of film scores from about 1955. The music is gentle, romantic, Viennese, perhaps neo-classical, and seemingly out of character. But, as Tolstoy wrote described the qualities of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony (1937) in the daily newspaper *Izvestia*, he remarked on the composer's notable "emancipation."

Sarasate's Navarra, op. 33 followed. This is a virtuosic work featuring the violins accompanied by the piano. The audience was treated to flying *spiccatos*, double and triple stops, *tremolandos*, left-hand *pizzicatos*, a duo cadenza, and ethereal harmonics. Exciting indeed!

Camille Saint-Saëns' The Swan from his Carnival of the Animals featured cellist Si-Cheng Liu accompanied by pianist Charis Dimaras. The audience listened in rapt attention to the sublime beauty of this outstanding, delightful work.

George Enescu's Bohemian Rhapsody No. 1. ably conjured images of dances colored in the rustic ways of peasantry with themes of a marked gypsy flavor in a heaving carrousel of rhythm. Genuine folk motives appear and reappear, and while he was a staunch nationalist, this music is his own, of a sensual character reflecting personal aesthetics rather than nationalism.



Lady of the Swans by Félix-Hilaire Buhot.

We end our musical journey at musical theatre, with an enduring example of beloved music and drama, selections from Andrew Lloyd Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera*. This completed the program accentuated

by a standing ovation leading to an encore of Americana variations that included the marvelous, pensive, Ashokan Farewell composed by Jay Ungar (1982) and widely popularized as the title theme of the 1990 PBS television miniseries *The Civil War* by Ken Burns.

This was an enjoyable concert with diverse, exciting programming featuring key members of the Punta Gorda Symphony. Don't wait to purchase tickets for upcoming events.

Runtime: About 60 minutes.

Looking Ahead

March 6, 2022: Stravinsky *The Firebird* / CPAC

April 24, 2022: *Get Happy! Joan Ellison Sings Judy Garland* / Charlotte Harbor Event & Conference Center

Outdoor Chamber Series

March 27, 2022: Harborside Brass / Lashley Park

For more information and ticketing, visit www.PGSymphony.org, or call 941-205-5996.

Edward A Kliszus

Performer, conductor, and educator Edward Kliszus began his musical studies at the age of 5 and has since been deeply involved in the fine, performing, and literary arts. He is a long-time and current member of the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) and the American Federation of Musicians (AFM). He studied trumpet performance and music education while attending the Manhattan School of Music. He was a student of Mel Broiles, principal trumpet of the New York Metropolitan Opera Orchestra at Lincoln Center. His post-graduate studies at New York University focused on trumpet and piano performance, music composition, and analysis of composer Elliott Carter's 1974 work *Brass Quintet*. He has performed at Manhattan's West Village venue *Monologues and Madness*. Currently, he focuses his artistic and creative endeavors in writing, music composition, jazz piano, and reviewing music and theatre venues for *The Front Row Center* in NY, NY, and *OpeningNight.Online*, which serves NY, NY, and sunny Florida.



Original review published on *OpeningNight.Online* can be read at <https://openingnight.online/the-punta-gorda-symphony-presents-strings-on-the-lawn-from-bach-to-broadway/>.