



••• MUSIC March 23, 2018 • John Thomason

Boca Symphonia to “Visit” Vienna—From Delray Beach

On March 27, the Crest Theatre and the Boca Symphonia will transport concertgoers to 18th and 19th century Vienna in a multimedia, interactive celebration of the city and its rich musical history. Titled “Symphonia Squared,” the program is the first of its kind. In addition to five compositions performed live, the production will feature theatrical elements such as acting and storytelling, along with projected images of Viennese settings.

Alastair Willis, the esteemed music director of the South Bend Symphony Orchestra, will make his sixth appearance behind the baton of the Symphonia, where he’ll lead the players through Christoph Willibald Gluck’s “Dance of the Blessed Spirits,” from “Orfeo ed Euridice;” Beethoven’s “Coriolan Overture;” Brahms’ “Hungarian Dance No. 3;” Strauss’ “Blue Danube Waltz;” and Mozart’s “Symphony No. 35,” for Sigmund Haffner.

The latter selection, composed as a serenade for the ennoblement of Viennese aristocrat Sigmund Haffner, Jr., is a personal one for Willis, who is the nephew of the elder Sigmund Haffner.

As he tells Bocamag.com, he looks forward to, among other things, embodying Haffner as part of this “Symphony Squared” program.



Have you done this kind of a multimedia concert before?

Several times, and it's always well appreciated. I have friends of mine who aren't musicians who come away feeling that they not only had a great musical experience—they've been entertained—but they learned something. It's a nicer way to get into the music, and it's unique. I don't know anyone else who does this.

It comes from my theatre background, of wanting to do more than conduct.

Tell me about the theme, "Vienna's Riches."

If you were to think of just one city in the world where the greatest composers in history either lived or had an impact—and not just composers but also artists—Vienna would have to be right up there. I can think Paris would be another contender. But when you're thinking music, and just who went through Vienna, it's astounding: a lot of the Baroque composers, Haydn lived just outside Vienna, Mozart visited there, Beethoven lived most of his life there, Brahms lived there, Bruckner lived there. The list is endless. Vienna just has such a rich history, and it's still voted today on all the travel channels as the No. 1 place in the world to live, because it's just such an amazing city in so many ways.

To be able to focus on the musical riches of Vienna in the time period roughly from the end of the 18th century through the mid-19th century, it's so great to get a sense of history. It helps to know the culture, it helps me figure out how to conduct these pieces, and it helps inform me about who I am now, because this culture continues right through to today.

Did these composers know and interact with each other? Were they competitive?

Yes, all of the above. There are great stories to tell about that, how Beethoven came into town, and the top pianist in Vienna at the time—I forget his name right now—but they had a face-off of who could play better. They would take requests from the audience and they would improvise, and the reigning guy did really well and brought the house down, but then Beethoven followed and brought the building down! The other guy was shamed into never coming back to Vienna because he wasn't as good as Beethoven, and Beethoven was top dog. There were all sorts of competitions, but they did interact.

Beethoven came to Vienna for one reason, and that was to meet Mozart. And they did meet. Brahms was good friends with the Strauss family, of the waltzing fame. They all knew each other and interacted. It must have been amazing.

Could you say a sentence or two about each of the five selections, and what distinguishes them?

They're all connected to Vienna, and two of them were premiered at the Vienna Burg Theater—that would be Gluck's "Dance of the Blessed Spirits" and Mozart's "Symphony No. 35," the Haffner symphony. Beethoven's "Coriolan Overture" was premiered in Vienna. Then we have Brahms, who lived many years of his life in Vienna, and we do one of his "Hungarian Dances." I make a comment like, "Hungarian—what's that got to do with Vienna?" Well, Vienna in the mid-19th century was the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. So Hungarian music was everywhere. Brahms seized that opportunity and wrote 21 delightful Hungarian dances. I wish we could play them all.

That leaves "The Blue Danube," which is an icon of Vienna. If you had to choose one piece of music that says, "Vienna," I think it would be "The Blue Danube." In the New Year's concerts by the Vienna Philharmonic, it's always in the encore, and everybody waits for it. I travel on United Airlines, and when you get on United, all you hear is "Rhapsody in Blue," because that's the iconic American piece. When you get on Austrian Air, they're playing "The Blue Danube." That's their national music.

It sounds like you've programmed a mix of iconic, familiar pieces, and other less familiar works by important composers.

There is a mixture there, and we have a couple of surprises not listed in the program that I will not tell you any more about!

Will classical music novices get more out of this program than they perhaps would by attending one of the traditional season programs?

Yes, I think so. You know how Disney caters not just to kids but to the adults as well? I want to make sure that our presentation is not just for those who don't know, and those who are intimidated, perhaps, and don't come to the main concert series. I want to make sure that this concert is not just for them, but for the people who *do* know a lot about music. I try to cover a wide variety of audience levels.

Do you have themes in mind for future Symphonia Squared programs?

Absolutely. If this could be a staple for a few years, I would love that!

"Symphonia Squared" is at 7:30 p.m. March 27 at the Crest Theatre at Old School Square, 51 N. Swinton Ave., Delray Beach. Regular tickets cost \$39. VIP tickets, which include a post-concert "Viennese Prosecco and Pastry" meet-and-greet, run \$49. Call the box office at 561/243-7922 ext. 1 or visit oldschoolsquare.org.



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