

Nothing But the Hits with Waterloo Chamber Players

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What does it take to elevate a piece of orchestral music to “hit” status? A promise of nothing *BUT* the hits might be misconstrued as a tired program of over-performed stalwarts. Not so for Waterloo Chamber Players! Conductor Bill Rowson’s imaginative programming includes great works from the orchestral canon, some very familiar and some that deserve to be better-known!



What does make a piece of music a hit, from the point of view of the performers? What characteristics resound with orchestral musicians? These are the questions that I put to members of the orchestra.

A great melody, catchy rhythm, and stirring theme were common elements when WCP musicians described orchestral hits. But universally, players mentioned the emotional connection that they make when performing a truly great piece of music. As violinist Olga Kalyniak put it, “Sometimes you have the opportunity to play a piece of music that really captures your soul. It will be something that stays with you forever and you will always remember where you were when you played it, and every time you hear it, it takes you right back there.”

Concert master Tina Giannopoulos agrees. “For me, a piece becomes a ‘hit’ when I make a real connection with it as a musician, whether through a beautiful melody, a compelling rhythmic motif, or rich orchestration that allows the orchestra to create contrast, colour, and emotional depth.”

Popular Orchestral Hits, No Question!

I asked WCP musicians to talk about their connections to pieces of music on the program, starting with familiar hits. All of these works clearly have strong audience appeal and are broadly known. Have they become overly familiar for the musicians who perform them? Not at all.

Antonin Dvorak’s *Slavonic Dances* are instantly recognizable to audiences, and it was these orchestral works that made him famous. The program includes one of the most exciting of these, the eighth dance from Opus 46. A proven audience favourite, the challenges of playing the work appeal to the musicians as well. For violinist Erin Nespoli this piece never gets old. “This one always grabs me with the minor-major swaps, the syncopation, and the winds-forward melodies. Seems simple but with complex layers and there’s always something new to notice even when it’s familiar.”

Another clear popular favourite on the program is *Nimrod*, from Edward Elgar’s *Enigma Variations*. There is no question that *Nimrod* has moved countless souls of audiences and musicians alike. WCP musicians remark on the intensity of the melody and its ethereal quality.

The *Berceuse* from Igor Stravinsky’s *Firebird Suite* also has a transcendent appeal and is a personal favourite of mine. Stravinsky clearly understood the expressive power of the bassoon, and the bassoon solo introducing the theme of the *Berceuse* is one of my very favourite moments in orchestral music. For WCP, performing the *Berceuse and Finale* from *Firebird* is a rare musical opportunity, as the full suite is typically performed by larger orchestras. Olga Kalyniak puts it succinctly. “Of all the repertoire on this current concert, for me, this is the biggest ‘hit’. Hit of adrenaline!”

Movie Magic

Of all composers, Mozart has arguably composed the most “hits”. The first movement from his *Symphony No. 25, Allegro con brio*, became a bona fide modern hit with the release of the movie *Amadeus*. Cellist Allie Scott reflects on listening to Mozart symphonies on a road trip. “This movement truly stands out with the dramatic and rare G minor key. You will not drift into another lane sleepily with this driving music!”

A concert of orchestral hits clearly must include something by arguably the greatest movie soundtrack composer of all time, John Williams, a favourite with violinist and concert master Tina Giannopoulos. “As a science fiction enthusiast, I’ve always loved John William’s film scores. From *Harry Potter* to *Jurassic Park* and *Star Wars*, he gives entire worlds a musical identity. Even a few bars of a theme can instantly bring the characters to life and the world they represent.” The orchestra is thrilled to perform the *Imperial March* from *Star Wars*. As Tina puts it, “Nothing is more powerful than hearing the *Imperial March* - Darth Vader’s theme. You can feel the evil inherent in the rhythm, the chromatic structure, the force of the brass fanfares, and the driving percussion. Goosebumps! Especially as a player in the orchestra.”

Putting the Spotlight on Outstanding WCP Soloists

The middle movement, *Adagio*, from Mozart’s famous clarinet concerto will be a highlight of this concert. Ginny Scarfino is known to WCP

audiences as our principal bassoonist, but many will also recognize her as the principal clarinetist of the Kitchener-Waterloo Community Orchestra. Written near the end of Mozart’s life, the *Adagio*’s poignant simplicity and peacefulness belies the turmoil and anxiety the composer was experiencing late in his life, when he wrote this beautiful concerto.

WCP is very pleased to shine a spotlight on the trombone section, moving them from the back row to the front of the orchestra. John Monkhouse, Susan Follows, Jay Costello, and Jim Edwards will perform the *Allegro con brio* from Jan Koetsier’s *Concerto for Four Trombones*.

Susan Follows appreciates the composer’s affection and understanding of writing for brass instruments. “The opportunity to play with strings is unique. The quartet is excited to show the agility and resonant sound of the instrument and the playfulness of the composition.”



Not Quite on the A-List (But Should Be)

A couple pieces on the program are less known, even to some of the musicians in the orchestra, including the *Finale* from Alexander Borodin’s second symphony. The composer deserves more attention than he generally receives, according to educational reformer and sometime composer Sir William Hadow. “No musician has ever claimed immortality with so slender an offering. Yet if there be immortalities in music, his claim is incontestable.” ([LA Philharmonic program notes.](#)) Cellist Allie Scott agrees. “I can’t think of a cellist that doesn’t enjoy playing Borodin. He knows how to give tenor voices something to say.”

The other lesser-known work on the program is Alexander Glazunov’s *Wedding March*. Best known for who he studied with (Rimsky-Korsokov) and who he taught (Shostakovich), Glazunov was nevertheless one of the most important Russian composers of the late 19th and early 20th century. His stately and joyful *Wedding March* certainly deserves to be better known than it is. Once again, Allie Scott puts it best. “Beats *Here Comes the Bride* on all counts!”

From the Heart of the Orchestra to the Audience’s Hearts

The big star of this program is the orchestra as a whole. Yes, you will hear shimmering woodwind licks and sweeping phrases from the violins, but give some thought and lend your ears to all sections of the orchestra. Bassist Barb Julian understands the double bass section as the glue that holds the orchestra together. “Many times we are driving the rhythm as in John Williams’ *Imperial March* or Dvorak’s *Slavonic Dance No. 8*. Often we are the fundamental note of the chord. Our part may be technically not so difficult but if we sound out of tune, the whole orchestra sounds out of tune. Maintaining a gentle sustained tone is so important in *Nimrod* by Edward Elgar, just as a bright and precise pop of sound is what Mozart requires. But what do I like the very best? I love it when the double bass gets a nice bit of melody that isn’t screamingly hard to play. I want to bring that out, with lots of vibrato and lots of smooth intense sound.

A live orchestral performance is a profound sharing of the human experience. As one wise orchestra member so eloquently puts it, “When the hairs on your arms stand up and there is that internal smile that happens within each person and spreads throughout the orchestra. When the conductor is so emotionally connected with the music and every person on stage, that things just happen in a magical way that cannot be described. Audiences remember those moments and we talk about them for years afterward.”

Above: L: Bill Rowson; R: Ginny Scarfino;
Below: John Monkhouse, Susan Follows, Jay Costello, and Jim Edwards