



Chamber Music Society of St. Louis celebrates St. Patrick's Day with Celtic concert

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The Chamber Music Society of St. Louis is getting its Irish up. Known for its intimate concerts, the organization is going green with “Celtic Salute,” a special St. Patrick’s Day themed program.

Blending humor and Celtic music, the concert mixes both traditional and contemporary composers. It also features five works that the society has never performed.

While the concert is not an annual event, executive and artistic director Marc Gordon, a French horn player and oboist for the St. Louis Symphony for 33 years, explains how the concert came about.

“Each February, when I start planning the next season, one of the first things I do is go through and see what special days or holidays come up that will work for specific concert nights. We hit the jackpot this year because we could perform this concert on St. Patrick’s Day,” he says.

Knowing how important St. Louis’ connection to Celtic culture is Gordon took great care in planning “Celtic Salute.”

“For this concert I did a lot of research to choose what works we would play because it’s not just about slapping pieces by Irish, Scotch, or any of the Celtic ethnicities on the program. I spent time searching for things that fit the size of the ensembles we have,” Gordon says.

“I found a lot of Irish composers, but many of them were from the early Baroque period and that didn’t fit the program. We would need a harpsichord to perform some of those, and I must pay attention to budget, and how many musicians I’m going to have in a specific program.”

Also shying away from the traditional pub songs of the holiday, “Celtic Salute” celebrates music that is often overlooked. It features three pieces by John Field, an Irish composer and pianist known for pioneering the nocturne, a musical form that influenced composers like Frédéric Chopin.

Charles Villiers Stanford’s 5 Bagatelles in Valse Form, Op. 183 features graceful piano miniatures that highlight his rhythmic style and stirring melodies.

Also scheduled is “Farewell to Stromness” by contemporary composer Peter Maxwell Davies. Written in 1980 to protest uranium mining in the Orkney Islands, its elegant melody has made it a popular work for chamber orchestras.

“This is an absolutely gorgeous short piano work that we have featured in our programs before,” Gordon says.

Berceuse for Violin and Piano by John Ireland will also be performed. This evocative work was inspired by traditional Irish folk music.

English composer, violist and conductor Frank Bridge’s “An Irish Melody for String Quartet – The Londonderry Air” is also included on the program. Beginning in the early 20th century, this composition was adapted for the beloved Irish song “Danny Boy.”

Finishing things up is “Rossiniana” String Quartet No. 19, a technically challenging work from Ian Wilson, a contemporary composer that Gordon is excited to feature.

“It is really funny. He weaves a whole bunch of Giacomo Rossini’s themes into this string quartet. This one will have the audience in stitches.”

Joining the Chamber Music Society of St. Louis for this event is University City native Brian Woods. Now an internationally acclaimed pianist, he released his first album, “Wanderings,” in 2024.

In addition to only having two rehearsals to learn the repertoire, Gordon and his musicians faced several other challenges in preparing for this concert.

“Because some of these pieces are unfamiliar it is more difficult to put together in the rehearsals,” he says. “The other challenge was that there are a lot of contemporary Irish composers, and we don’t specialize in that. We play everything from music that’s 300 years old up to music that was written earlier this year. But that’s not what our focus is. We leave that to other organizations who have composers in residence for that.”

Stepping out of his comfort zone as a programmer, Gordon is excited for audiences to experience the concert.

“I look forward to sharing the connections between classical tradition and Celtic folk heritage and the interaction between this string quartet and our audience.”