

# Explore music in a new way with Branford Marsalis, ASO

**Friday, September 30, 2016 by DIANE WITTRY Special to The Press in Focus**

As I was growing up, everyone knew the names Wynton and Branford Marsalis. Trumpeter Wynton was winning Grammy Awards for his classical and jazz recordings. His brother, saxophonist Branford, was leader of the Tonight Show Band (1992-'95) on "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno."

Initially, they both surprised the musical world with their ability to fluctuate between the genres of classical and jazz.

Artists usually had to "specialize" in what they did. You were either a classical artist or a jazz performer. Classical artists even tended to separate themselves further according to specific composers and styles. The Marsalis brothers, breaking tradition, easily crossed back and forth between styles and opened the door for many other musicians to incorporate jazz elements into classical and vice-versa.

Branford Marsalis, a three-time Grammy Award-winner, played with jazz ensembles since the 1980s. He began performing with classical ensembles in 2003, making his first appearance with the New York Philharmonic in summer 2010 and has returned to that stage many times.

Branford has become known as the more adventuresome of the two brothers as he experimented with new sounds and dabbled in new compositions. As a composer, Branford was nominated for a 2010 Tony Award for "Best Original Score Written for the Theatre" and received a 2010 Drama Desk Award for "Outstanding Music in a Play," both for the Broadway revival of August Wilson's "Fences."

This interest in new music drew Branford to the sounds and compositions of Brazilian composer Hector Villa-Lobos, one of the most significant musical minds of the 20th century in Brazil. Villa-Lobos' music was influenced by Brazilian folk music, as well as classical music, creating a combination of musical styles.

Villa-Lobos' music also displays African, Native-American and Portuguese influences. And he was deeply influenced by the classical composers Bach, Mozart and Beethoven. This was evidenced in his early composition, Sinfonietta No. 1 (1916), which was given the subtitle "A Memoria de Mozart." This musical tribute to Mozart is the piece that will open the Allentown Symphony Orchestra 2016-'17 classical music season concerts, 7:30 p.m. Oct. 15 and 3 p.m. Oct. 16, Miller Symphony Hall, Allentown.

Keeping with the Villa-Lobos theme, Marsalis will join the ASO performing the "Fantasia for Soprano Saxophone and Orchestra," also by Villa-Lobos. This piece was written in 1948 for the famous French saxophonist Marcel Mule.

Although Mule received a copy of the score, he never actually performed the piece and it was not premiered until 1951 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Branford began championing the “Fantasia” in 2008 when he toured with the Philharmonia Brasileira, performing music by Villa-Lobos, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the composer’s death. The “Fantasia for Soprano Saxophone” has become a staple of Branford’s repertoire ever since.

As a champion of musical change and diversity, Branford Marsalis can certainly appreciate the pairing of his performance of pieces by Villa-Lobos, with the famous Symphony No 3, “The “Eroica,” by Ludwig van Beethoven.

Symphony No. 3 marks a dramatic turning point in Beethoven’s life, both in his compositional style, but also in the fact that he was beginning to lose his hearing, which for a musician, was his most precious asset.

With Symphony No. 3, written in 1803, we are ensconced in a time when the French leader, Napoleon Bonaparte, is striving to take over the world. The Symphony initially used an Italian phrase, “Intitolata Bonaparte” (“Titled Bonaparte”), with a German phrase underneath the title, “Geschriben auf Bonaparte” (“Written for Bonaparte”). After Napoleon declared himself emperor, Beethoven vehemently erased these words and in 1806 retitled the work “Sinfonia Eroica ... Composed per festeggiare il sovvenire di un grand Uomo” (“Heroic Symphony, Composed to celebrate the memory of a great man”).

We know the piece now simply as “The Eroica.” It is a stirring work, bold and innovative musically. It projects optimism, power and strength, characteristics that I am sure Beethoven originally admired in Napoleon.

The first movement begins with two striking chords. This was something never done before at the beginning of a symphony, and still immediately grabs your attention. A funeral march anchors the second movements, contrasted with festive hunting horns in the third movement. The piece finishes with a triumphal finale that starts as a folk melody and becomes faster and faster with a flourish of ferocious string playing. It is Beethoven’s music at his best.

Tributes to the past, and adventures into new musical arenas tie all of these pieces together. These same characteristics are exemplified by our featured guest artist Branford Marsalis. He and his family have been classical and jazz trail-blazers for the last few decades. They are rooted in the traditional, but always pushing forward musically, like Beethoven during his own time period.

With a “gracious poise and supple tone,” Branford Marsalis will take the stage with the Allentown Symphony Orchestra in a pair of concerts to be remembered. Come explore the music with us in a new way.

“Meet the Artist,” with Branford Marsalis and Diane Wittry, noon Oct. 14, Miler Symphony Hall, Allentown. Marsalis will speak about his life, his musicianship and answer questions from the audience. The event is free for patrons and those attending the Oct. 15 or 16 Allentown Symphony Concert.

Diane Wittry is Music Director and Conductor of the Allentown Symphony Orchestra, Artistic Director (USA), International Cultural Exchange Program for Classical Musicians, Sarajevo Philharmonic, Bosnia, and author, "Beyond the Baton" and "Baton Basics" (both, Oxford University Press).

Allentown Symphony Orchestra concert tickets: Miller Symphony Hall Box Office, 23 N. Sixth St., Allentown; [allentownsymphony.org](http://allentownsymphony.org); 610-432-6715