

King of Instruments Week-long ‘Organ Extravaganza’ precedes ‘Symphonic Organ Festival’ and Ewazen ‘Concertino’ world premiere

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“In my eyes and ears, the organ will forever be the King of Instruments.”

- Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Allen Organ is the official organ of the Allentown Symphony and we have enjoyed a wonderful partnership for many years.

Many people in the Lehigh Valley are not aware that Allen Organ, the largest digital organ company in the world, is located in Macungie in Pennsylvania’s Lehigh Valley. Allen Organ was on the front end of technology when in the 1960s the firm utilized binary-coding systems developed for NASA, and applied them to the sampling and replication of musical sounds.

Through its research and development, Allen Organ created and marketed an electronic organ that sounds just like a church pipe organ. This allows for orchestras like the Allentown Symphony to perform pieces for organ and orchestra, even though we don’t have a pipe organ in Miller Symphony Hall, Allentown.

This year, our partnership has blossomed into a week-long “Organ Extravaganza,” March 6-10, and a world premiere piece by Eric Ewazen for Organ and Orchestra that will be featured at the “Symphonic Organ Festival” concerts performed by the Allentown Symphony Orchestra, 7:30 p.m. March 11 and 3 p.m. March 12, Miller Symphony Hall.

When you combine the sounds of an organ with a symphony orchestra, it is really like having two orchestras together up on the stage. The organ has the capacity to recreate many of the same sounds as the instruments of the orchestra by just pulling or pushing a “button” or “stop.” And then when you add all those low pedal notes and fancy footwork that is required to play them, you have quite a show.

The new organ piece that will open the concerts is written by New York composer and Juilliard faculty member Eric Ewazen and was commissioned by the Allen Organ Company for the Allentown Symphony Orchestra. Ewazen has written more than 200 pieces for orchestra, concert band, brass quintet, string quartet and all assortment of chamber music and solo players. He has had pieces performed by orchestras and ensembles all over the world.

I am very excited to be conducting the world premiere of Ewazen’s “Concertino for Organ and Orchestra.” It is a fun, exciting concert-opener with fanfares and triumphal writing for organ and orchestra.

Performing the piece will be internationally-renowned organist Hector Olivera. The Buenos Aires native began playing the pipe organ when he was three and later attended Juilliard School of Music, New York City. Olivera has performed solo concerts throughout United States, Europe, Asia, Australia, Central and Latin America and has been featured as a guest soloist with prominent symphony orchestras worldwide. He is known as “one of the greatest organists in the world today.”

When putting together this program, I knew I wanted to include the famous Symphony No. 3, otherwise known as the “Organ” Symphony, by Camille Saint-Saens. This piece is a wonderful showpiece for the orchestra and organ. The mighty chords that begin the last section of the piece feature the organ in all its splendor of sound, and the intimate slow movement with more accompanying organ-playing is composed of one of the most beautiful melodies ever written.

And then, just to make sure that you are getting enough organ music on this concert, Olivera will also perform a solo organ piece, “Coronation March” from “Le Prophets” by Giacomo Meyerbeer, written in 1849.

Sandwiched between the Ewazen world premiere and Saint Saens’ Symphony No. 3, we will perform a tone-poem by Richard Strauss. “Death and Transfiguration,” written by Strauss in 1889, is based on a poem by Alexander Ritter. It is a powerful work in which a very sick man reviews his life and struggles with death, in the end finding eternal peace. It is one of my favorite tone poems and through the musical writing, I feel that Strauss is using the orchestra to create an organ-like sound and fullness. When you hear the piece, you might also recognize one of the melodies as being very similar to the tune that John Williams used in the flying scene on the soundtrack of the movie, “Superman.”

Preceding the Allentown Symphony Orchestra March 11 and 12 concerts is the week-long “Organ Extravaganza,” in partnership with the American Guild of Organists and churches throughout the region. (See accompanying schedule of events.)

My favorite event will take place at 5:30 p.m. March 6 in Miller Symphony Hall where Allen Organ will feature organists performing on an Allen Organ on the stage, while you get to sit up close and personal, also on the stage, and watch them play. The concession stand will be open so you can enjoy a drink and relax after work and listen to some great organ music. It is a free event and a great way to get ready for a week of exciting organ concerts and events.

“Meet the Artist” with Allentown Symphony Conductor Diane Wittry, composer Eric Ewazen and organist Hector Olivera, noon March 10, Miller Symphony Hall. The talk is free and open to the public.

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; 610-432-6715. Free student tickets, underwritten by a grant from the Century Fund, are available for ASO concerts.