

## Chicago CLASSICAL REVIEW

# Grant Park Music Festival opens season with a powerful Walton punch



*Dashon Burton was the vocal soloist in William Walton's "Belshazzar's Feast" Wednesday night at the Grant Park Music Festival. Photo: Norman Timonera*

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The Grant Park Music Festival knows how to do an opening night.

Carlos Kalmar and the Grant Park Orchestra and Chorus kicked off the lakefront festival's 84th season in rousing style Wednesday night, with a well-balanced program that showed the full Grant Park forces' inimitable blend of tonal refinement and raw power.

For once, the meteorological gods cooperated. Opening nights have been plagued by hellacious weather in recent years—not least the torrential rains that threatened cancellation a year ago.

Wednesday night at the Pritzker Pavilion, however, offered a pluperfect Chicago summer evening with mild temps, a refreshing lake breeze and nary a cloud in the sky.

The main event of this opening lineup was *Belshazzar's Feast* by William Walton. And with its blend of orchestral brilliance and choral virtuosity, one could hardly have come up with a work better suited to display the myriad collective gifts of Kalmar, the Grant Park Orchestra and Christopher Bell's Grant Park Chorus.

The British composer viewed his 1929 opus as a vocal symphony rather than an oratorio. Osbert Sitwell's episodic, mix-and-match libretto strings together Biblical verses that paint the Israelites' captivity in Babylonia, a hedonistic feast at Belshazzar's court, the handwriting on the wall, and the Israelites' celebration at their release and freedom.

Written while Walton was still in his 20s, *Belshazzar's Feast* is a young man's work—flashy, kaleidoscopic, strange and audacious in its over-the-top excess. In his brief introduction, Kalmar mentioned that the evening's performance would not be employing the brass bands Walton later added to the already large orchestra. "The piece is loud enough," he noted.

Walton's showpiece was aided immeasurably by a magnificent solo turn by Dashon Burton. This young American singer is the real thing—a bass-baritone with a rich, rounded voice, faultless diction and a natural, expressive style that had one hanging on every word. Burton's dignified singing of his solo passages added a gravitas that Walton's quirky confection can use, providing dramatic weight and confiding intimacy as needed.

Under chorus director Bell, the Grant Park Chorus hit the ground running this summer with a polished, bravura performance. From the first unaccompanied passage of the male singers, every word was crystal-clear and strongly projected, the full chorus bringing a primal edge to Walton's ritualistic writing. The melancholy of the opening section was conveyed as surely as the Dionysian frenzy of the feast and the exultant, nearly unhinged rejoicing of the coda.

The Grant Park Orchestra was in fine estate as well. Kalmar's skillful balancing and concentrated direction painted the eerie mystery of the handwriting on the wall and deftly underlined the sheer weirdness of the piece throughout. Walton's timbral rim-shots to the praising in turn of the gods of gold, silver, iron, wood and stone had one laughing out loud at his jokey ingenuity.

Kalmar built up the final section to a coda of blazing chorus and orchestra sound to end the evening. The Grant Park Music Festival is once again open for business.



*Photo: Norman Timonera*

Music of Haydn was the program centerpiece. Haydn's Symphony No. 99 in E flat is one of the composer's least-played late symphonies likely because it has no quaint title. Yet No. 99 is among his finest and the Grant Park musicians delivered a stylish, near-ideal performance.

A flowing slow introduction segued into the ensuing Allegro, lithe and energized with a gracious lilt to the main theme. Some untidy woodwind ensemble apart, the musicians provided stately elegance in the Adagio, with affectionate moulding by Kalmar.

The finale went with a wonderful light vivacity, Kalmar ensuring that Haydn's dynamic flips and wind-string alternations made nimble, witty impact. A trio of ambulatory pigeons seemed to enjoy the performance as much as the audience, strutting up and down the center-left aisle, almost in time with the music.

The evening led off with Sean Shepherd's *Magiya*. This eight-minute work, says the composer, offers an homage to the strain of colorful Russian mysticism heard in such works as Stravinsky's *Petrushka* and Rimsky-Korsakov's opera, *The Golden Cockerel*.

Yet there was little such magic to be had in Shepherd's heavy-footed opener Wednesday night. With its herky-jerky rhythms and superficial glitter, even Kalmar and the Grant Park players couldn't make a convincing case for this rather empty curtain-raiser.

*The program will be repeated 7:30 p.m. Saturday. Carlos Kalmar leads the Grant Park Orchestra in music of Gluck, Mozart, Weber and Elgar with violinist William Hagen 6:30 p.m. Friday at the Pritzker Pavilion.*

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