



Great Lakes Chamber Music Fest energized by fresh blood

George Bulanda, Special to The Detroit News 4:08 p.m. EDT June 11, 2015

(Photo: Paul Marc Mitchell)

As many classical music organizations wind down for the summer, one is gearing up for more than two weeks of concerts from Saturday through June 28.

The Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival, known for its interesting mélange of contemporary and familiar repertoire, gets in tune for its 22nd year with performances by top-notch musicians in nine area venues.

And for the first time in its history, the festival won't be helmed by pianist James Tocco, a native Detroit. He passed the reins to Welsh cellist, pianist and conductor Paul Watkins, the GLCMF's new artistic director. Watkins' mother-in-law was the late Detroit-born pianist Ruth Laredo, who often played at the GLCMF.

Watkins has fresh plans, but he doesn't want to wipe the slate.

"It's definitely not a case of a new broom sweeping clean," Watkins says from his home in New York. "I want to make sure that I nurture and nourish the festival and introduce new ideas and new artists, but at the same time keep the legacy going because it's been doing very nicely for the last 20-odd years."

Tocco won't be disappearing, though; he'll play in two concerts this year.

"I really wanted to keep involving him because he's a wonderful artist," Watkins says. "Last year he invited me to play the Brahms 'E Minor Cello Sonata' with him, and it was one of the best cello-piano duo experiences I've had in my life."

For his part, Watkins will perform in several festival concerts as cellist, pianist and conductor.

In his maiden voyage as artistic director, Watkins chose the theme "New Beginnings: Making Music in America." Music by such American composers as Copland, Crumb, Barber and Gershwin are on the menu, but so are foreign-born composers who either visited or lived in the United States, such as Dvorak, Martinu, Stravinsky and Ravel.

What makes American music distinctly American is difficult to pin down, but Watkins isn't at a loss for words.

"For me, as an outsider, there's a great simplicity in American music, a sort of openness that I find incredibly appealing," he says. "And I say that even after tackling some of the most complicated pieces by composers like Elliott Carter. There's a directness of expression that the best of American music has."

For non-native composers, America supplied a font of inspiration. When he visited these shores in the 1890s, the Czech composer Dvorak said, "This land is full of melody." His "American String Quartet," which will be performed twice during the festival, conjures African-American and folk music. Others, including the Frenchman Ravel and the Russian Stravinsky, were attracted to jazz.

"Jazz colored and influenced French music greatly and that's why I've programmed so much Ravel in the festival," Watkins says. "It goes wonderfully with Gershwin, and Ravel was a great admirer of him."

Among the international performers in the festival are the Emerson String Quartet, cellist Sharon Robinson and pianists Alessio Bax and Anton Nel. And there are several Detroit Symphony Orchestra musicians taking part, including concertmaster Yoonshin Song, principal bass Kevin Brown and principal flute David Buck.





The "New Beginnings" in the festival's thematic title also refers to Watkins himself, because dramatic changes have marked his life lately. Aside from his appointment as artistic director, Watkins left his long-held position in the Nash Ensemble and in 2013 joined the ranks of the vaunted Emerson String Quartet as cellist. He also moved from London to New York.

"Change is definitely good, and from my point of view I really wanted to reflect that in my first festival," Watkins says. "It's not only a new beginning for the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival, but it's a new beginning for me."

George Bulanda is a Metro Detroit freelance writer.

Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival

Saturday-June 28

For a complete performance schedule, venues and tickets, go to greatlakeschambermusic.com or call (248) 259-2097.