

Great Lakes Chamber Music Fest: Highlights and more

David Lyman, Special to the Detroit Free Press

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(Photo: Great Lakes Chamber Music Fest)

Paul Watkins wasn't really certain he should be the guy leading the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival.

He has said it many times since becoming the 24-year-old festival's artistic director in 2015. He was unprepared to do the job of leading metro Detroit's premier classical musical fest, which this year features nearly two dozen performances at venues throughout metro Detroit.

Never mind that he was the cellist of the world-renowned Emerson String Quartet and a notable conductor, and had already been the music director of the English Chamber Orchestra.

“I had never run a music festival before,” he said, speaking by telephone from Tokyo, where the Emerson had been recording for NHK, Japan’s national public broadcaster. “Nor had I ever been an artistic director before. I’m not sure whether it was blind or deaf faith in me.”

One thing that brought him a measure of comfort — an artistic safety net, perhaps — was that his predecessor and longtime friend, James Tocco, had a penchant for building the two-week festival around a particular theme.

“I found that themes provided a focus and a good discipline as we started creating the festivals,” says Watkins. “What I particularly liked about it was that, rather than limiting what was done, it led to rather eclectic programming. And also, to a fair amount of new music.”

Watkins’ self-deprecating manner makes him sound a little like a bit of a bumbler. He’s not. Since taking over from Tocco, he has cobbled together some memorable fests. His first GLCMF assumed an American theme. The next year, he turned to his own British roots.

This year, it’s something completely different.

“We’ve titled it ‘Music Beyond Words,’ ” he says. He’s not just talking about lyrics, which are probably the first link that comes to mind between music and words. He also means the way we speak about music. The way words can inspire discussion. Or criticism. Or poetry.

“In this day and age of tweets and social media posts, I think words have taken on a different sort of importance,” he says. Even as musicians develop their interpretations of music, he says, words are among their most essential tools. “During my four years as a member of the Emerson, I’ve found that the discussions we have about the music we’re playing help to give us a fresh, and even more intense, perspective on the music. Words are really, really important.”



Welsh-born cellist and conductor Paul Watkins became artistic director of the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival in 2015. For this year's festival, running June 10-25, he has built nearly two dozen programs that revolve around the theme of "Music Beyond Words." Watkins is also the cellist of the renowned Emerson String Quartet, which will be a part of the festival's opening night program. *(Photo: Great Lakes Chamber Music Fest)*

The highlight of this year's festival is the June 17 world premiere of "Shostakovich and The Black Monk: A Russian Fantasy."

"It's the largest production the festival has ever done," says Watkins. "I think it will be a remarkable presentation."

The production, created by stage director James Glossman and Emerson violinist Philip Setzer, explores composer Dmitri Shostakovich's obsession with Chekhov's short story, "The Black Monk." The 90-minute production brings together the Emerson String Quartet and seven actors including Len Cariou — the original Sweeney Todd — and Jay O. Sanders, among others, to examine the mystical and politically charged link between the Chekhov story and Shostakovich's String Quartet No. 14.

While "The Black Monk" is the largest of the festival's presentations, there are others that are equally intriguing. Among them:

Saturday, June 10: The opening-night performance at the Seligman Performing Arts Center features the Emerson String Quartet and the Calidore String Quartet, winners of the first \$100,000 M-Prize in 2016. The Calidore will make four other appearances during the festival.

Wednesday, June 14: Pianists Lucille Chung and Alessio Bax present a program of works for two pianos or piano four-hands at Kirk in the Hills. This is also the world premiere screening of "Secret Song," a documentary about the creation of Alban Berg's "Lyric Suite" for string quartet, at the Detroit Film Theatre.

June 16: Festival artistic director and the Friction Quartet perform at the Prop Art Studio, along with five poets sharing work inspired by Shostakovich's String Quartet No. 11.

June 18 & 23: A series of free community concerts at the Detroit Institute of Arts, featuring nearly a dozen artists, including Setzer, Tocco, Hun Lee, Watkins, Lauren Skuce Gross, Bax and others.

Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival

June 10-25

Venues throughout metro Detroit

greatlakeschambermusic.org

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