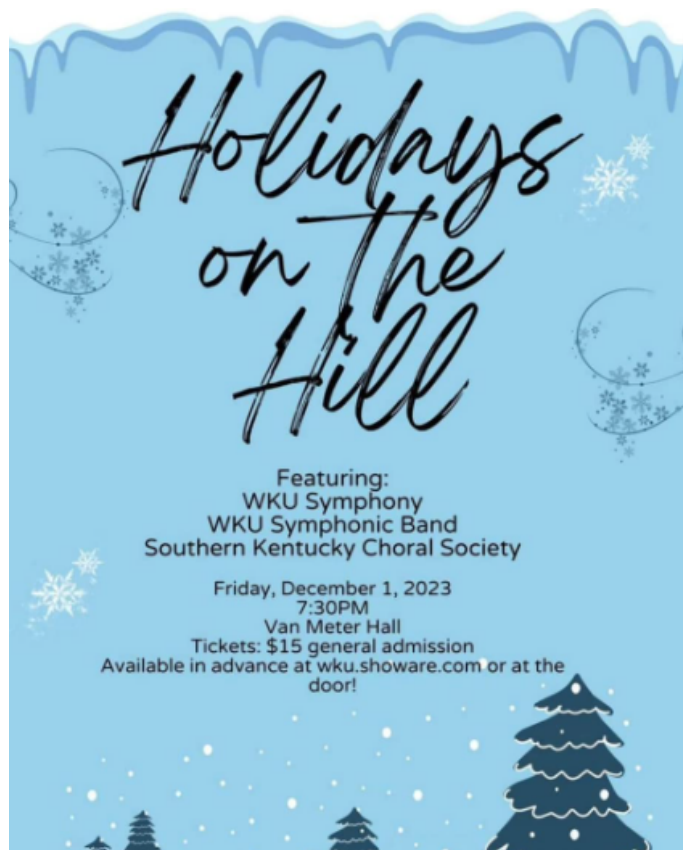


WKU Symphony Concert 12/1/2023, Friday, 19:30, Van Meter Auditorium, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Kentucky.

Review by Timothy Simpson, for Musiterania™.com



December 2, 2023 - Timothy Simpson

The Music Department at Western Kentucky University presented the program entitled "Holiday on the Hill" featuring the WKU Symphonic Band, the WKU Symphony, and the Southern Kentucky Choral Society under the guidance of Dr. Brian St. John, the Baker Professor of Music, Music Director and Conductor of the WKU Symphony. The concert took place at the legendary Van Meter Hall on Friday, December 1, 2023 at 7:30 p.m.

The concert featured several Christmas favorites that are common during the Christmas orchestral concert season and the World Premiere of an original arrangement by Dr. Matthew Herman, professor of Theory and Composition at WKU entitled "On Christmas Day".

The opening section of the concert featured the WKU Symphonic Band, Dr. Gary Shallert, Director and Conductor, as well as several graduate student conductors.

The first piece "A Christmas Festival" by Leroy Anderson (1908-1975) for Orchestra, arranged here for Symphonic Band, is a great opener for concerts during the holiday season and will now be a part of a useful repertoire for students as they continue on their music careers.

Introduced by light percussion and a flute soloist in the balcony, "Pat-A-Pan" by Bernard de la Monnoye, arranged for band by Robert Longfield from an arrangement by Chip Davis, is a delightfully rhythmic piece that is Boleroesque in the way that it moves from beginning to end incorporating different sections of the ensemble which maintains a constant beat throughout. It's canonlike character unfolds beautifully and returns to the flute and percussion as it began. It was capably conducted by Nathaniel Nash, a graduate student in conducting.

Another Chip Davis piece arranged for Band by Robert Longfield is the richly orchestrated version of "Greensleeves". Ms. Brenna Derby elegantly led the ensemble through this peaceful but majestic Christmas classic. It seems the piece is too short as you want such beautiful sounds to continue. The introduction of the piece provides a pleasant foundation for the piece to unfold. The phrases in the introduction seem familiar but they are new to me.

When "An Irving Berlin Christmas" is played it feels like we have left Kentucky for New York City. Jalen Allred, graduate conductor, steered the players through the heavy traffic of this urban feel Christmas music. I'm not sure about the intro of the piece as it seems to get off to a rough start. This arrangement of Irving Berlin's Christmas hit "White Christmas" seems rather clumsily arranged for band and comes to an abrupt end. Not sure this is the best arrangement of the material for band.

After a short break to convert the stage for the WKU Orchestra, Aaron Price, graduate conductor, led the symphony in the classic "Sleigh Ride", another arrangement by Anderson, which is often played at orchestral Christmas performances. This is certainly something the players will meet again in their future music careers. Of course the punch line is the trumpet "neighing" like a horse at the end of the piece.

Dr. Brian St. John admirably led the orchestra through Felix Mendelssohn's famous Overture to "A Midsummer Night's Dream". A cornerstone of the classical repertoire, this piece is possibly one of the most difficult pieces to play in terms of sheer delicacy of execution and "nowhere to hide" moments which challenge even the greatest orchestras. Explaining that the child prodigy composed the piece at the age of 17, everyone realizing that the orchestra as a whole doesn't average much more than that, helps accept that it isn't meant for stodginess, but rather youthfulness. Although it is classified under incidental music, no different from film music, it stands alone as a piece which captures the senses and illuminates one's imagination of the magic of Shakespeare's masterpiece. It takes guts to play this piece and is not for the faint of heart!

Serge Prokofiev's "Troika" from his Lieutenant Kije Suite is something you recognize somehow without knowing what it is. Aaron Price, another talented graduate conductor, commanded the orchestra well through this fantastic piece. Prokofiev's orchestral mastery is apparent in this brief yet rich section of this historic composition. Prokofiev was commissioned to write film music for the film "*Lieutenant Kijé*" (1934) in the Soviet Union despite the fact that he had already been living in Paris and was known to be too experimental for the conservative Soviets. I have often said that a lot of music that is written for film will endure far past the lifetime of the film for which it was written. A delightful piece for sure, and Prokofiev just so happens to be one of my favorite composers.

Dr. St. John returned to the stage to conduct the lush string sounds of Peter I. Tchaikovsky's classic "The Grand Pas de Deux" from his Nutcracker Ballet of 1892. Tchaikovsky is a really an "every concert" composer for young string players as they learn to master their instruments in the glorious orchestrations that this composer never fails in supplying.

William Mason-Walker, graduate conductor, led the symphony and Southern Kentucky Choral Society in Handel's famous "Hallelujah Chorus" from the "Messiah". Dr. St. John gave everyone homework to go and research why people always stand to this piece. The reasons don't really matter and I've heard all of them, simply stretching the legs is enough reason for me! But if ever a piece deserved it then this one does.

To end the concert the WKU Symphony and Southern Kentucky Choral Society, excellently led by graduate conductor Demetrious Mason-Walker, performed a world premiere called "Christmas Day" by WKU Theory and Composition professor Dr. Matthew Herman. This arrangement of popular Christmas pieces is certainly a piece that deserves to be among the top Christmas Concert choices for orchestras around the world. It is well composed, is upbeat and positive, glowing orchestrations, and some delicious a capella moments for womens, mens, and mixed choruses. The piece uses the gospel spiritual sound, which gives it a distinctly American sound that is rich in harmony and buoyant rhythmically. I hope to add it to my standards of Christmas music every year.

The audience was enthusiastic and in a good mood. They gave a warm applause to all pieces and were obviously grateful to the participants for their hard work in putting on such a beautiful evening of music. At times the lighting cues were miscalculated which was distracting at times and the decent use of amplification was well tempered and helped enhance the performance of the Choral Society, which sang and articulated nicely. The Southern Kentucky Choral Society is directed by Dr. Paul Hondorp, Director of Choral Activities at WKU.