

Newburyport Chamber Music Festival opens Aug. 7

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By Keith Powers / newburyport@wickedlocal.com

A three-part world premiere, Mussorgsky's expansive "Pictures at an Exhibition," and Beethoven's "greatest"— in the words of artistic director David Yang — string quartet, are all on the bill for this summer's Newburyport Chamber Music Festival, which begins Aug. 7 at St. Paul's Episcopal Church.

Season 15 of the festival also includes recitals featuring organ (including a rare work for organ and string trio, one of the world premieres), major piano quintets, and numerous lectures and open rehearsals that have become a popular tradition for festival audiences.

Founder (and violist) Yang has become a familiar face to those audiences. "The nice thing about the festival is that 60 to 70 percent of the audience know me," he says. "They trust me. We can play traditional works, but we can push the envelope a bit as well."

This year "pushing the envelope" includes an ambitious, three-part world premiere, commissioned from composer Scott Ordway, a colleague of Yang's on the music faculty at the University of Pennsylvania.

"I met Scott seven or eight years ago," Yang says. "He was a Ph.D. student at the time, I liked his music, and he seemed like a great guy. So I filed that away, and this year it came around that we have this awesome opportunity to have three pieces premiered."

Ordway has written three interlocking works for different instrumentation, entitled "Mare Vitalis: Parts I-III." The first, for solo piano, is part of a major program by Amy Yang (no relation to David), a solo recital on Aug. 7 that also includes Schumann's "Waldenszenen" and "Pictures at an Exhibition."

The second part of “Mare Vitalis” is scored for piano quintet, to be performed on Aug. 11 along with Elgar’s piano quintet —“the Elgar has this rich, sunny movement that’s almost all viola,” Yang says, “it fits so comfortably under the fingers, it kind of plays itself”— and the first quartet from Haydn’s opus 33.

Ordway’s final part of the trilogy is set for organ and string trio. Meg Harper will perform on the St. Paul’s organ, and will add Bach’s D minor Toccata and Fugue, and Jehan Alain’s “Litanies,” as well.

“It turns out we have this terrific organist living near here in Portsmouth,” Yang says of Harper. “So I tried to figure out a good recital for her. The Bach was kind of a given, and this Jehan Alain piece is really beautiful. We were trying to balance things alongside the premiere, and mix things up.”

One work with special meaning for Yang will be Gyorgy Kurtag’s “12 Microludes,” a work for string quartet that will appear on the Aug. 13 program.

“Kurtag is this legendary figure at a festival in Canada, where I first met him,” Yang says. “He should be a household name, but he isn’t. We recorded his string trio, and last year my daughter and I were spent an evening in his house discussing the recording. We spent like five hours with him — he just turned 90 years old. It’s not too often that you’re in the presence of an absolute genius.

“We have all these epic pieces on the program — the Opus 132, ‘Pictures at an Exhibition’ — but these Microludes are small. Literally some of them are thirty seconds long. But they’re the pieces I’m most excited about playing.

“I think we might play them, then talk about them a bit, and then play them again,” he says. “I never like to talk about the music too much, but these pieces are so brief but so intense.”

The Newburyport Chamber Music Festival runs Aug. 7 through 14 at various venues, with an Aug. 13 performance in Portsmouth, NH. For tickets and information on the performances visit www.newburyportchambermusic.org or call 978-701-4914.

Keith Powers covers music and the arts for the GateHouse newspapers and WBUR’s ARTery. Follow @PowersKeith; email to keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Newburyport Chamber Music Festival

WHERE: Aug. 7-13 at various venues in Newburyport; Aug. 14 in Portsmouth, N.H.

WHEN: Aug. 7-14

COST: Tickets \$32 adults, \$11.50 students.

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