

New Jersey Hills Media Group



For this music director, the 'Ultimate Odd Couple' is a draw

By P.C. ROBINSON Out & About Editor Feb 27, 2020

Like pairing a heavy burgundy with sea bass, pairing a dramatic operatic workhorse like Richard Wagner's "Die Walkure" with Ruggero Leoncavallo's "Pagliacci" seems morally wrong – unless you're David Wroe.

But that's exactly what Wroe, the [New Jersey Festival Orchestra's](#) music director, is doing, all in the name of growing music appreciation.

The Wagner/Leoncavallo combo is "Opera's Ultimate Odd Couple," to be presented at 7 p.m. Saturday March 14, at the Presbyterian Church, 140 Mountain Ave., Westfield, and 3 p.m. Sunday, March 15, at The Concert Hall, Drew University, 26 Madison Ave. The Westfield performance is preceded by a free pre-concert lecture at 6 p.m. by Michael Rosin.

Mixing it up is nothing new for the British-born Wroe, a vastly seasoned, award-winning music director who, for more than 20 years, has guided the orchestra in its evolving journey from a hyper-local group – formerly known as the Westfield Symphony Orchestra – to the regional powerhouse it is today.

In fact, diversity was one way to grow audiences in troubled times, he said in a Thursday, Feb. 20 phone interview from Scottsdale, Ariz.

Becoming a regional body was really one done out of necessity, as similar groups started suffering in around 2010. To survive, the orchestra reached out to other groups, including the former Colonial Symphony of Morristown, to pool resources and grow.



Wroe, who moved to Westfield about 10 years ago with his wife, pianist Shuang Gua-Wroe and now-teenaged sons, also began offering those new, diverse programs to essentially grow the business.

'Dead Germans'

While the works of “dead Germans” had their admirers, “they don’t cut it” for today’s audiences, he said. Hence, he borrowed from what music promoters did in the 1800s – mix up all types of works. So he’s providing programs that run the gamut from Broadway shows to movie soundtracks to flamenco dancing.

He takes the plan a step further with the orchestra’s March offering. Typically, “Pagliacci” is offered with Pietro Mascagni’s “Cavalleria Rusticana,” which like “Pagliacci” is written in the verismo, or realistic, style.

This time, however, Wroe said he thought, “Let’s do something shockingly different.”

For Wroe, an admitted Wagner-lover, that meant using not a whole Wagner work, which can exceed three hours on a good day, but part of one. And not just part of any work, but that first act of “Die Walkure,” which Wagner lovers prefer for its drama.

Not only that, but the act itself only uses three singers and has minimum set requirements, making it easier to transport orchestra, performers and set to both to the Concert Hall at Drew University in Madison, and the Presbyterian Church in Westfield, the orchestra’s home venue.

Even more shocking, perhaps, are the operas themselves: Both are stories of forbidden love. Where “Pagliacci” is about a more traditional love affair, “Die Walkure” is about the romantic relationship between twins who are separated in childhood only to meet later in life – and fall in love, angering the gods.

“It’s definitely an interesting match,” Wroe said.

Chorister

Prod Wroe a little and the affable British-born conductor, who will only admit to being “in my mid-fifties,” will admit a fondness for diversity that eventually led him to his life as a music conductor.

Not that, at the beginning, he realized how his life would turn out. His musical journey started at the age of nine, when his parents sent him away to a boarding school to become a chorister or member of the youth choirs that typically sing during Anglican Church evensong and other services.

“I hated it,” he said. “But once I was there the discipline and music were awe-inspiring. It exposed me to a wealth of classical (church) canon, like Gesualdo and Bach and Mozart every

night of the week, along with five or six psalms at every mass. We sung in Latin too. I was just bathed in that culture.”

Eventually he realized the immersion prepared him for what he really wanted to do with his life: be not only a conductor but the director in charge of all, from music to management.

Needless to say, it's been a successful journey for Wroe, whose many tenures in the business have included residency at the New York City Opera, known in its heyday as the clearinghouse for light operas and revivals.

His stint as associate director under the baton of Maestro Seiji Ozawa at the Boston Symphony Orchestra laid the basis for his own polished conducting technique, saying Ozawa's own movements were “so efficient, so dynamic, so clean. He was inspirational.”

Lest one think Wroe is a classical music purist, however, think again. While he gravitates toward such symphonic Romantics like Hector Berlioz, Gustav Mahler, and Richard Strauss, he'll listen to any music that's “done well,” from classic rock groups like Cream, to classic Hollywood musicals and rap, the latter genre he discovered courtesy his sons, now 15 and 17.

Although, of course, he – as do all musicians – love what they are performing while performing it.

And, he's still seeking more ways to shock and awe his audiences.

Asked if he might consider a performance of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's “1812 Overture” with, say, the immolation scene from Modest Mussorgsky's “Khovanshchina,” he laughed.

“Don't tempt me,” he said.

Tickets for both concerts are \$30 to \$76 general admission, and \$15 for students under 21. They are available online at www.njfestivalorchestra.org. Tickets may also be purchased by calling the box office (908) 232-9400. For more information, visit www.njfestivalorchestra.org.

