

# Sunday in the park with the symphony

*Relax on the Long Center lawn for a summer concert series where classical attire is out, dancing and picnicking are in*

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SPECIAL TO THE AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Published: 10:05 a.m. Wednesday, July 14, 2010

With the best ground-level view of the city's skyline as its backdrop, the Austin Symphony's Concerts in the Park series has settled into its home at the Long Center's front lawn.

A few hundred people came out recently to see the symphony's chamber winds play Mozart, Dvorák and Orff's 'Carmina Burana,' obviously relishing the opportunity to listen to the symphony without the usual decorum. The audience had a vibe of contented relaxation, sitting on blankets or chairs on the grass slope that looks up onto the Long Center's City Terrace.

Greg and Kathryn Zaney plotted their spot in the shade. They sat behind the players, with a view facing the conductor, but it was worth it, Kathryn Zaney said. 'It's wonderful because the conductor is so animated. It is so much fun to see it from this perspective.'

They also came prepared. 'We have a lovely gourmet meal of ham and rare prime rib,' Kathryn Zaney said, 'on fresh bread, carrots, with potato chips and unmentionables,' motioning to the drinks in their hands. You can't do this in the symphony. 'Look at the backdrop here,' Greg Zaney said. 'You have the clear blue sky; it makes it just wonderful, spiritual, relaxing.'

The Concerts in the Park start at 7:30 p.m. each Sunday through Aug. 29. The concerts are free and last about an hour, with a different lineup each week.

'This really does attract a different audience than we attract in the Long Center,' said Anthony Corroa, the symphony's executive director. 'You'll see people coming from the hike-and-bike trails. When they start hearing the music, they'll start wandering over here, wondering what's going on.'

Dan Elzner was one such fan, sitting on a blanket next to his bicycle. Elzner, an insurance adjuster, has found a way to combine the dual pleasures of cycling and music, by taking in the symphony on his loop from West Campus. For many here, it's become a weekly ritual. In Elzner's case he comes every Sunday, and then every other Wednesday for the nearby Blues on the Green. 'It's good to catch these first few shows, in case there's a hurricane at the end of the summer,' he says.

Elzner's favorite is the big band shows. 'I don't know the names of all the songs, but I recognize every single one of them.'

When the music starts, the dancing does, too. Anthony and Elizabeth Siela were out for their second weekend, dancing, daughter in tow. 'It's a cost-effective way to wear out some kids, and expose them to something different than what they're used to six out of seven days a week,' Anthony Siela said.

Plenty of other symphony formalities are dispensed with. Going barefoot is encouraged for young and old. There is dancing on the neon-lighted concrete tongue directly in front of the conductor. And while the

musicians try to beat the heat in ball caps and comfortable clothes, there is a low-level chatter that bubbles casually throughout the show.

No one is about to be shushed here, and the crowd is appropriately carefree. Many use the time to read or send text messages, or to eat a variety of foods like watermelons and tamales from coolers filled with wines and beers. Dogs abound. One group even brought its own hookah.

All this rule-breaking brings up a lone criticism: the heat.

At 7:30 on a recent night, it was still 94 degrees. And Mozart's staccato runs and sprightly harmonies seemed to taunt. You cannot summon to mind a lush Austrian countryside, no matter how beautiful the playing - and it was indeed beautiful.

As if by magic, however, once the sun set and the music drifted into the lyrical, soothing 'In Trutina' from 'Carmina Burana,' a moment of transcendence appeared. The piece reflected the new mood, with a calming meditation on dark summer nights. The sound carried to the banks of Lady Bird Lake, drawing a few more in.

The audience was not ready to go home at the concert's end. After making the effort to haul blankets, chairs and, often, supper from nearby parking lots, and with the heat finally subsiding, it was simply too pleasant to find the motivation to move on. That feeling lingers for Anthony Corroa, who can't remember a show he's missed - and the concerts began in 2002. 'This is what I look forward to in the summer. This is our eighth season now, and it's one of the things we can give back to the public, for free.' Corroa enjoys the audience feedback, which occasionally includes special requests for songs. 'We've gotten some loyal followers over the eight years. It's very cool.'

Corroa, too, can't help but remark on the beautiful setting. And yet, after years at Wooldridge Park, it might not have been. 'The original plan was to move from park to park, but I got to thinking, well, people might not be able to find us ... so we decided to stay at Wooldridge.' When the Long Center opened, the series sponsors David and Claudette Hartman 'wanted to move it here, and I tell you, it couldn't be better.'

William Lewis, the symphony's principal bassoonist, agreed. 'When we played in Wooldridge Park, we had more mosquitoes - a lot more mosquitoes. And there was more of a separation between us and the audience because we were in the gazebo. And here, being on the same level and the kids dancing around out here, there seems to be much more contact with what's going on with the music, or when a dog passes through,' he said, laughing, as a deer-sized dog brushed past him. 'It's more intimate.'

As the man responsible for much of the music that's played each summer, Lewis hopes to choose songs that are audience-friendly, 'not something that is so out there that you have to concentrate on what's going on. We're outside, in a venue where you want to talk and relax and enjoy. So you need to hear things you've heard before, that are light and enjoyable.'

The first woodwinds program featured the world premiere of his arrangements of the Rosina and Figaro duet from 'Barber of Seville' and Mozart's Concerto for Bassoon in B-flat. Lewis, though, does not get a chance to take in the city's skyline. 'We're so worried about getting the page turns and hoping the music doesn't fly away.'

### **Hartman Foundation Concerts in the Park**

Sunday - Brass

July 25 - Woodwinds

Aug. 1 - Big Band

Aug. 8 - Strings

Aug. 15 - Brass

Aug. 22 - Woodwinds

Aug. 29 - Big Band

Music starts at 7:30 p.m. Free parking is available at One Texas Center, Barton Springs Road at South First Street. Paid parking is available at the Palmer Garage for \$7. [www.austinsymphony.org](http://www.austinsymphony.org)

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