

Idyllic setting complements musical menu

[Kevin Bazzana](#) / Times Colonist

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What: Music by the Sea

When/where: July 4 through 12, Rix Centre for Ocean Discoveries (Bamfield Marine Sciences Centre, Bamfield)

Tickets: Sunday matinées \$40-\$110, weekdays \$50-\$150, weekend evenings \$75-\$210, festival pass \$540

Concert details, tickets, general information (including travel and accommodations): 250-728-3887;
musicbythesea.ca

This year marks the 10th season of Music by the Sea, the annual summer music festival in scenic Bamfield, which bestrides a sheltered inlet on the south shore of Barkley Sound, on the west coast of Vancouver Island.

A remote community with a tiny population might seem an unlikely setting for a high-profile festival, but isolation and quiet are ideal for music-making, and healthy ticket sales suggest that the public concurs.

This year's festival, as usual, will comprise eight evening concerts and two Sunday matinées, held in what must be the Island's most idyllic venue: a glass-walled space within the Rix Centre for Ocean Discoveries, boasting a scallop-shell-shaped roof, excellent acoustics and a spectacular view of Bamfield Inlet.

Among the accomplished classical performers on this season's roster are just two locals: flutist Suzanne Snizek and trumpeter Bryn Badel. The remaining dozen come from Boston, San Francisco and cities across Canada.

Some are return visitors — violist Steven Dann, for instance, who has appeared every year since 2011, and most notably pianist Marc Ryser, who has been with the festival from the beginning and is its artistic adviser for chamber music. But there are no stars; the festival seeks to foster a sense of community among the musicians.

Additional performers are supplied by the festival's mentorship program. Now in its fourth year, this program allows accomplished young professionals to work intensively on chamber music, with Dann and Ryser, in the 10 days before the festival, and to participate in the first few concerts. This year's four participants form a complete string quartet and include Elizabeth Skinner, a violinist who grew up here and is pursuing a master's degree at McGill University in Montreal.

As always, the programming is divided evenly between classical music and jazz. The company has half a dozen jazz musicians, including Canadian pianist John Stetch, who lives in New York, and local pianist and composer Christopher Donison, the festival's founder, CEO and executive artistic director.

With 13 string players in the company this season, it is hardly surprising that two highlights of the classical programming are string octets — the popular one by Mendelssohn and a rarer specimen from 1900 by George Enescu. Among the other standard repertoire is music by Bach, Schumann, and Dvorák, and what Donison calls “a bit of a Mozart thing,” including several of his greatest chamber works.

There is a wide-ranging and interesting complement of music from the early 20th century: Vaughan Williams, Ives, Bartók, Kodály, Martinu, Roussel, Villa-Lobos. And there are more recent works, among them John Harbison's Six American Painters and major clarinet solos by Luciano Berio and Steve Reich. The latter are vehicles for Montreal-based Krista Martynes, who will also participate in the première of a trio by Stetch for clarinet, cello and piano.

There is vocal music, too. On July 7, the popular local tenor Ken Lavigne and the Banff-based mezzo-soprano Nan Hughes will perform songs and duets from musicals by Stephen Sondheim. Hughes will also perform classical repertoire in various concerts: songs by Mozart and Debussy, rarely heard works by Zemlinsky and Martin and an excerpt from Donison's opera Eyes on the Mountain (2001), which is based on stories by Jack Hodgins.

The opening and closing concerts will include three new fanfares by Donison for a posthorn and 25 tuned ship's horns, all positioned on boats in Bamfield Inlet, the latter "played" on shore by a keyboard using new, locally developed computer technology.

(As Amy Smart reported in the Times Colonist on June 9, Donison is pursuing plans to use this boat-horn system — "the world's largest musical instrument" — as part of the official celebrations of Canada's 150th birthday.)

Donison has always harboured an ambitious long-range vision of Music by the Sea as a year-round "music village," with expanded facilities supporting an international community of professional artists and students and encompassing a broad range of performance and educational activities. (It is a registered non-profit society.)

For now, however, it remains a summer festival, although it continues to grow, artistically, organizationally and in terms of the eager support it receives from the residents of Bamfield.

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