

Princeton Symphony Goes Live at Morven

By **Dan Aubrey** - September 23, 2020

The Princeton Symphony Orchestra is using a small presentation to make a big statement on Thursday, September 24, when the PSO Brass Quintet performs at Morven Museum & Garden.

The 5:30 p.m. outdoor presentation also marks a new partnership between the museum and the orchestra.



Trombonist Lars Wendt of the PSO's Brass Quintet

The offering is the first of the new "Chamber Music in the Garden" series of small presentations designed to help the orchestra reconnect to its audience after the state of New Jersey closed performances venues in March to stop the spread of the coronavirus.

Audience seating consists of designated socially distanced pods for one or two people. The cost per pod is \$35 and attendees must bring their own lawn chairs or blankets.

The quintet featuring Jerry Bryant, trumpet; Tom Cook, trumpet; Jonathan Clark, horn; Lars Wendt, trombone; and Jonathan Fowler, tuba, will perform music styles ranging from Renaissance to Broadway.

PSO trombonist Wendt seemingly speaks for the orchestra when he says, "I'm excited. It's good community outreach."

One of the numerous musicians whose life was disrupted by music venue closures to stem the spread of the COVID-19 virus, Wendt says, "I've been one of those musicians who has been doing Facebook live things. And people are hungry for art and culture and to experience art and music and feel a sense of community. It's exciting to have a chance to play for people and a great way to use a beautiful place. This season has been devastating, and people are hungry. This synergistic connection with Morven is a great opportunity."

Wendt credits the PSO administration's innovative planning and outreach for providing several new opportunities and building new audiences. Executive director Marc Uys, he says, "is doing a lot of things to spread the organization through partnerships with McCarter Theater, the New Jersey Youth Orchestra, and a lot of things to pull people in."

Wendt says his own history with the orchestra began in 1994. "I had more hair then and used to be one of the younger people. I watched the orchestra grow and attract so many musicians from outside the region."

Although not part of the original "Little Orchestra" launched by Portia Sonnenfeld, Wendt has the professional overview to say, "It is amazing how all orchestras started out with community passion and to make friends and connect. It's an amazing story to see how it grew."

Wendt says he appreciates the PSO's push to provide opportunities for young composers and those from different cultures. "There is always this push. It's great to play a lot of classical music, but there is a push to include other cultures."

He also points to the changes in program. "We've gone from orchestra that plays five concerts a year and pops — they're trying to expand. There are a lot of exciting things. In spite of all these things, we're trying to thrive."

Speaking for many, Wendt says "It's a year I'd rather not remember. It's been hard to create that safe opportunity for people to experience music as a great thing."

A resident of Titusville for 20 years and 10 years prior in Ewing, the married father of twin sons and a daughter says he is "a central New Jersey boy" who grew up in Bridgewater.

"I remember as a young child when a brass quintet came to school, and I heard that sound and wanted to be a musician," he says of his early interest in music.

Yet despite that desire, when he graduated from Bridgewater High School in 1983, he entered the College of New Jersey as a science major.

He says the reason was that he "also liked science. My father said do both. My brother was a bass player playing in bands and didn't have a degree. And I decided to do music on the side."

He elaborates more on his choice. "Being a musician is not an easy thing. It's a hard career. While it can be musically satisfying, finding a full-time position is hard. If you love teaching, it can be very rewarding. But you're working when people are relaxing. While that's satisfying, if there are people outside your circle, it's more difficult. A lot of people I know are married to non-musicians. I wanted the stability of a day job that would give me the chance to enjoy music and not feel the pressure.

For Wendt that was teaching physics at Hunterdon Central for 26 years. "I just retired. That was a rewarding career. I enjoyed working with the kids. (But) it was time for a change."

That includes working for Princeton University's Department of Civil Engineering and researching the connection between global warming and land use management. That includes conducting reports of farming practice and ammonia deposition from manure and urine waste.

Looking back at his TCNJ days, Wendt says he spent a lot of time in the music department and took lessons from trombonist David Uber, who, among other credits, played first chair trombone with the New York City Ballet Orchestra, New York City Opera, and NBC Symphony Orchestra.

"He was a huge influence," says Wendt. "There were good professors there who were very supportive."

That includes noted Pennington-born big band drummer Tony DeNicola. "He'd let me sit in and play with him at the Rathskeller (a performing space at TCNJ). He was very generous. He was a great guy. He was old school, played with Harry James, great drummer and great pedagogue."

Thinking of his own music development, Wendt says, "You meet someone who inspires you, and it makes you want to improve and get better."

He adds that education programs, such as the ones the PSO is initiating, and playing with better musicians in a regional ensemble all help with help with challenging and improving young musicians.

Wendt says there were several reasons he chose to pursue the trombone. First, it was there "the first time I ever heard a brass instrument."

He says another reason is that his Bell Labs plant manager father used to play music by the 1960s big band leader Bert Kaempfert.

Then it also was connected with something very simple. "My best friend played trombone in elementary school, and my mother (a telephone operator) said I should play trombone too. I didn't like it, and my music teacher wouldn't let me quit."

In retrospect, Wendt says, "Someone told me that you don't pick your instrument, your instrument picks you. I think that's an interesting twist."

Wendt says that he started getting more interested when brass-using bands such as Blood, Sweat, and Tears hit the radio waves and his

sister bought a Count Basie recording. "It was electrifying," he says.

Asked how the pandemic has affected his own playing Wendt says he has surprisingly been playing more than he thought he would. "I do a lot of different things. I play with a wedding band and play socially distant events. And playing at home and multi-tracking — I'll use a multi-tracking program and use duet books and record myself and record the second track for practice — to challenge myself.

Yet he says other musicians are struggling. "For a lot of them, it's full-time. Anecdotally, on Facebook some are considering career shifts. Some are in difficult situations. Orchestras are struggling, wedding venues have closed. It is devastating and sad. My sense is that a lot of them feel forgotten. That's my sense.

"The problem is that we think that music and art are disposable, that we really don't need it. But I think it's air, like oxygen. It's important. What would life be without music, without art? It makes us human. Music in so many ways has been a comfort to me in tough times. Whether you're a musician or not, you can still enjoy it. That's the whole point. We need people who listen as well as people who play."

Princeton Symphony Orchestra Brass Quintet, Morven Museum and Garden, 55 Stockton Street, Princeton. Thursday, September 24, 5:30 p.m. The series continues on Thursdays October 8 and October 15. There is ample free parking at the end of the museum's driveway. 609-497-0020 or www.princetonsymphony.org.

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