

# Chicago Tribune

## Review: Grant Park Music Festival opens with a choral blockbuster under friendly skies



*Carlos Kalmar conducts Grant Park Orchestra and Chorus in Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* on June 13, 2018 opening night of the Festival's 84th season. (Norman Timonera / HANDOUT)*

*By John von Rhein  
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Wednesday evening brought one of the few Grant Park Music Festival season openers that wasn't severely compromised or canceled outright because of downpours, bone-chilling temperatures or various combinations thereof, in recent years.

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In fact, it was clear skies and comforting lakefront breezes all the way at the Jay Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park where the Grant Park Orchestra and Chorus began their 10-week season of classical and popular concerts.

As officials reminded the estimated 8,500 in attendance, this cultural and civic partnership, now entering its 84th season, remains unique in the nation. It cannot be said often enough that having a festival of such high caliber in the heart of the city during the summer months has added immeasurably to the allure of Chicago as an international tourist destination.

The crowd, which included delegates to this week's League of American Orchestras national conference hosted by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, heard a typical Carlos Kalmar program in that a choral blockbuster and a relatively rare classical symphony shared the program with a snappy piece of American music.

Under the galvanic direction of Grant Park's principal conductor and artistic director, the performances carried enough strength and vitality to reduce a few errant notes and ensemble blemishes in the orchestral playing to inconsequentiality.

I cannot vouch for the acoustics out on the Great Lawn, but the electronically enhanced sound in the pavilion was a model of unobtrusive engineering. This was especially true of the clear, well-balanced projection of the large chorus, big orchestra (including augmented brasses) and solo voice in William Walton's 1931 oratorio "Belshazzar's Feast."

Director Christopher Bell's treasure of a Grant Park Chorus is having its usual packed summer, including a commissioned choral-orchestral premiere by Latvian composer Eriks Esenvalds next week and Orff's "Carmina Burana" closing the season on Aug. 17-18. The Walton whetted one's anticipation.

Bell's massed voices negotiated their hairpin rhythmic turns, rapid-fire declamation and jazzy syncopations with remarkable precision at sometimes

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whiplash tempos, notably in the celebration after the king's death. The chorus' big, malleable sound kept its firmness and quality even at the softest dynamic levels.

Kalmar's emphasis on rhythmic bite within propulsive speeds allowed for no letup in dramatic intensity, and in fact the element of danger added an extra shot of adrenalin to a genuinely exciting performance. Bass-baritone Dashon Burton's firm, powerfully expressive delivery of the biblical text made him a commanding soloist.

Kalmar led a similarly tight exposition of the opening piece, American composer Sean Shepherd's 2013 "Magiya."

Inspired by a distinctively Russian sense of magical evocation ("Magic" is in fact the subtitle of the brief orchestral piece) heard in the music of Rimsky-Korsakov and Stravinsky, "Magiya" is perfect outdoor summer concert fare. Shepherd compresses a tremendous amount of frisky rhythmic energy into only eight minutes of music (not to mention a fair amount of whimsy), and his punchy eruptions of brass and percussion are laced with subtle echoes of early Stravinsky.

Kalmar and friends did a slam-bang job of it before turning to the charming and gracious classicism of Haydn's Symphony No. 99 in E flat.

Why this late masterpiece isn't played more often is beyond me; the Chicago Symphony Orchestra hasn't touched it since 2005. I prefer my Haydn symphonies on the leaner side such as conductor Giovanni Antonini gave us with the "Drum Roll" at last week's CSO concerts. But Kalmar kept a light hand on the tiller, sharpening articulations and balancing textures so well within urgent tempos that the largish orchestra never sounded thick, heavy or sluggish.

*The program will be repeated at 7:30 p.m. Saturday. Principal conductor Carlos Kalmar will be joined by violinist William Hagen for Mozart's Violin*

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*Concerto No. 4, at 6:30 p.m. Friday. The rest of the program holds overtures by Gluck and Weber and Elgar's "Enigma" Variations. Jay Pritzker Pavilion, Millennium Park, Michigan Avenue and Randolph Street; [www.gpmf.org](http://www.gpmf.org).*

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