

Review: The good, the bad and the windy as Grant Park Music Festival opens in Millennium Park

By Hannah Edgar
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Wednesday was a night for Grant Park Music Festival diehards.

First, those present had to brave the 90-plus degree heat, which bit a sizable chunk from opening night crowds in both the Pritzker Pavilion and on the Millennium Park Great Lawn. Festival orchestra musicians visibly sweltered in their concert blacks, with some busting out shorts and sandals for the concert.

Nor was the evening's bluster any help. High winds yanked sheet music from stands, sent program books fluttering and caused a pair of speakers to swing perilously several yards above the head of Carlos Kalmar, Grant Park's artistic director and principal conductor, for most of the evening.

But if soloist Michelle Cann won't forget her festival debut anytime soon, it probably wasn't because of the weather. The pianist has become one of the most visible exponents of the music of Florence Price, who [launched her career in Chicago](#) and enjoyed rare institutional recognition here as a Black female composer. But as Cann told Grant Park audiences in an emotional address, despite concertizing a new, authoritative version of Price's Piano Concerto in One Movement (1934) for more than a year now, she's never performed Price's music in the composer's home city.

One wagers Grant Park audiences won't soon forget Cann, either. In her mighty performance of Price's concerto, Cann didn't just surmount the acoustic challenges of the Pritzker Pavilion stage: She sailed over them with the grace and flexibility of a high jumper, her powerful fingerwork crisply enunciating her interplay with the orchestra. After a big-boned exposition, Cann toggled easily to the luscious, unaffected sincerity of the lyric middle section — with gorgeous solos by oboist Mitchell Kuhn and cellist Walter Haman — and later still, to the heady exhilaration of a ragtime-like Allegretto.



Michelle Cann performs Florence Price's Piano Concerto in One Movement with the Grant Park Orchestra on June 15, 2022. (Chuck Osgood / HANDOUT)

An extended standing ovation brought Cann back to the stage for an encore by Price's protégé and fellow Chicagoan, Margaret Bonds: her "Troubled Water" fantasia on the spiritual "Wade In the Water." Cann's powerful interpretation unified the five-minute set of variations into a monument of concerto-like sweep and grandeur.

Just as Price is in the midst of her own long-brewing reassessment, so is Richard Wagner, whose excerpted "Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg" followed the piano concerto. But the two composers are moving in as different directions as one could imagine. While Price posthumously carves out her place in the repertoire, Wagner, an ideologue who wrote unsparingly about his own antisemitism, has remained a fraught cornerstone.

Quite the program whiplash, if you ask me. A common denominator seemed clear to artistic director and principal conductor Carlos Kalmar, at least. Using his usual audience address to praise Price's concerto, Kalmar inadvertently supplied what, for years, has also doubled as Wagner's defense: "There are only two types of music: good music, and the other one."

Sure enough, “Meistersinger” isn’t short on that. Much of its four and a half hours includes Wagner’s fizziest and most charming music, descriptors that usually wouldn’t share a ZIP code with his other operas. Cobbling together a pseudo-symphony of sorts, Kalmar and the Grant Park Festival Orchestra performed the “Meistersinger” Overture and three excerpts from Act III often performed together: the Prelude, “Dance of the Apprentices,” and “Procession of the Mastersingers.”

Though it occupied the program’s coveted second half, Kalmar’s “Meistersinger” ultimately proved mixed. The usually inspiring overture too often sounded directionless and limp with anticlimax. The Act III excerpts landed more convincingly, especially the rounded, burnished Prelude and floating “Dance.”

But any lackluster stage presence from this “Meistersinger” was no fault of the consistently superb festival orchestra, who deserve special commendation for keeping their cool when the winds picked up again and sent more than one orchestra part flying during “Procession of the Mastersingers.”

Inverting concert-order convention, Kalmar led off with the program’s *actual* symphony, Mozart’s D major “Haffner.” Mozart composed the symphony at a breakneck pace in 1782 after his father volunteered him for an eleventh-hour commission against his will. Kalmar led this “Haffner” likewise. But on Wednesday night, those Mach-one speeds tended to shear off the symphony’s character — especially in the Andante, which had little of the movement’s familiar pliancy and lackadaisical levity.



Principal conductor Carlos Kalmar leads the Grant Park Orchestra on June 15, 2022. With the concert on a warm and gusty evening, the Grant Park Music Festival launched its summer season at the Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park. (Chuck Osgood / HANDOUT)

Unsurprisingly, the extroverted outer movements came off best under Kalmar's baton. The Grant Park Festival Orchestra sounded strikingly, compellingly decadent in the opening Allegro con spirito; similarly, piano passages in the Presto finale glowed with incandescent intensity. No waifish, hyper-transparent Mozart was this.

Varied showing aside, props to Kalmar for a master class in keeping one's cool on the podium early on, when, mere bars into the "Haffner," a gust tousled the pages of his score. The conductor defaulted to conducting the rest of the first movement from memory without so much as a flinch. Looks like Grant Park will be keeping those giant music clips handy a while yet.

*The Grant Park Music Festival continues until Aug. 20; www.grantparkmusicfestival.com
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