

Symphony readies its Italian program

By JAN SJOSTROM
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Everybody knows what brainstorming sessions generally produce — more work for somebody.

About a month ago, Michael Ellert, who contracts orchestral musicians for the Palm Beach Symphony, was discussing the 2007-08 season with Ray Robinson, the organization's music director and general manager. Among the topics raised was hiring soloists from the orchestra, as the symphony did in its 2005-06 season.

In the middle of the conversation, Robinson brought up a concert the symphony will play Tuesday at the Flagler Museum. "There's something missing from the Italian program," he said. "Aren't there some Vivaldi bassoon concertos?"

"Yes," said Ellert, the orchestra's principal bassoonist. "There are 37 of them."

No doubt you can guess what happened next. Robinson asked Ellert if there were any of them he'd like to play Tuesday. It so happens that Ellert had one in mind, the Bassoon Concerto in A minor — but he hadn't played it since he was in his teens.

"I asked Ray to give me 48 hours to make a decision," the 57-year-old bassoonist said. "I pulled the score out of my music closet. When I read through it, I realized it was still basically in my fingers."

Ellert, who also is the principal bassoonist and personnel manager for the Palm Beach Opera orchestra and one of the organizers of the Palm Beach Chamber Music Festival, keeps a lot of music on file.

The Vivaldi concerto "was the first real music I played on bassoon," he said. He was assigned the concerto by his teacher, William Polisi, who was the principal bassoonist for the NBC Symphony Orchestra under Arturo Toscanini and the New York Philharmonic under Dmitri Mitropoulos.

Ellert met Polisi at a summer music camp he attended when he was 15 and was so impressed that he decided to take lessons from him. At the time, he was switching from the clarinet to the bassoon.

Polisi was a stern taskmaster. "My first year playing he assigned me three concertos over the year," Ellert said. "This was first year, and right away we were into big pieces."

The following summer, Ellert played the first movement of the concerto in a competition at another music camp and won. He hasn't performed the piece since and has never played the full concerto for an audience.

Vivaldi composed the concerto, which replaced Archangelo Corelli's Concerto Grosso on the program, in the early 18th century when he was teaching at the Ospedale della Pieta, a high-class orphanage in Venice for the illegitimate daughters of noblemen. Apparently, Ellert said, the school included at least one talented bassoonist, because the composer wrote a great many bassoon concertos for the students while employed there.

The Italian concert, like the rest of the symphony's programs this season, focuses on the music of a single country. It opens with Gioacchino Rossini's Overture to the opera *II Signor Bruschino*, one of his lesser-known works. An operatic work was a must, Robinson said. "When you talk about Italian music, you think about opera," he said.

The concert also features Ottorino Respighi's *Gli uccelli* (The Birds). As the title suggests, birds figure prominently in the piece. Each movement is based on the call of a different bird.

The concert concludes with a work written not by an Italian, but a German: Felix Mendelssohn. The composer sketched out his *Symphony No. 4 (Italian)* in Italy during his 1830-31 grand tour. He pulled it out again when the London Philharmonic Society asked him to compose a symphony. The work premiered in 1833 in London with the composer at the podium.

Italy will be very much on Ellert's mind as he puts the finishing touches on the Vivaldi concerto.

He took time out from practicing to point out some of the highlights in the 12-minute piece. "There's a lot of leaping around from low to high registers where you can hear the flexibility of the instrument," he said. The slow movement, though beautiful, isn't typical. "It's very florid," Ellert said. "There are a lot more notes than you normally hear in a slow movement. It really shows off the virtuosity of the bassoon."

Does he regret taking on the challenge at such short notice? Not really.

Ellert and Robinson have long advocated providing more performance opportunities for local musicians. And then there's Ellert's history with the Vivaldi concerto. "I have a special place in my heart for it," he said.

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IF YOU GO

Palm Beach Symphony's 'Musica Italiana' concert

When: 7:30 p.m. Tuesday

Where: Flagler Museum

Information: 655-2657 or visit [www.](http://www.palmbeachsymphony.com)

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