

BLACKBEARD

SET TO MUSIC

The 18th-century pirate and his ship inspire an orchestral work

By DAWN DECWIKIEL-KANE
Staff Writer

Chases on the high seas, a thunderous battle and the quiet aftermath of devastation rendered in fast fiddling, bass drum booms and cymbal crashes.

The legendary 18th-century pirate Blackbeard has inspired films, songs, even amusement parks — as well as an original play with music at Triad Stage.

Now, the pirate's tale has been captured in a new orchestral work by world-renowned violinist/fiddler and composer Mark O'Connor.

O'Connor has composed a six-minute overture named after Blackbeard's infamous flagship "Queen Anne's Revenge." The ship's sunken remains now are being recovered off North Carolina's coast in the Beaufort Inlet.

On Thursday and Saturday, the overture will receive its world premiere right here in Greensboro, played by the Greensboro Symphony Orchestra.

Its debut will open 17 Days, the city's new arts and culture festival featuring more than 85 concerts, plays, art exhibits, dance performances and other entertainment through Oct. 8.

At 50, the New York-based O'Connor has composed and performed a treasure trove of music.



Mark O'Connor composed "Queen Anne's Revenge."



Music

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After winning several national strings championships as a teen, he has gone on to sell more than two million CDs as a solo recording artist and win two Grammy Awards.

He has collaborated with artists such as cellist Yo-Yo Ma, singers Roseanne Cash and Renee Fleming, and documentary director Ken Burns. The Los Angeles Times called O'Connor "one of the most talented and imaginative artists working in music."

To compose "Queen Anne's Revenge," O'Connor drew on his style of orchestral writing, which combines influences of traditional classical music, folk and jazz.

Even so, "This piece doesn't really sound quite like anything I have ever written," O'Connor said from his native Seattle, where he appeared earlier this month.

Through music, O'Connor depicts Blackbeard's chases on the high seas, the impending doom of his prey, the pirate culture and, finally, Blackbeard's demise.

It's bound to shiver its audience's timbers.

"The violins and strings of the orchestra play a prominent role in describing the energy of that time and the energy that Blackbeard had, this sort of devilish and mysterious life that he probably led," O'Connor said.

"Also, there will be very dark and sinister chords from the brass and loud percussion at times, depicting the actual attacks of the ships."

O'Connor won't perform with the symphony. But he

WANT TO GO?

What: Greensboro Symphony Orchestra concert, featuring the premiere of Mark O'Connor's "Queen Anne's Revenge." Also on the program are works by Mendelssohn and Elgar, and pianist Lukas Geniunas performing Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 1.

When: 7:30 p.m. Thursday and 8 p.m. Saturday

Where: Thursday's concert will be held at War Memorial Auditorium, Greensboro Coliseum Complex. Friday's will be held at Dana Auditorium, Guilford College.

Tickets: \$22-\$38, \$5 students

Tickets and information: 335-5456, Ext. 224; Greensboro Coliseum box office; www.ticketmaster.com.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

For a complete listing of 17 Days events, visit www.17daysgreensboro.org.

will be there on Thursday to hear the first public performance of his work.

"I am very excited about this sort of main fiddle theme that the piece is centered around, and it's a very different kind of tune," he said. "It would be somewhere in the Appalachian genre, but I don't think there is any other Appalachian tune that would sound like this. I think it will be interesting and exciting for audiences to hear."

So does orchestra music director Dmitry Sitkovetsky.

Sitkovetsky calls it a "very dynamic, action-packed score. It uses a lot of percussion instruments, as well as a full orchestra, so I expect it to be a big success."

In addition to O'Connor and the symphony, credit American Express and 17 Days festival coordinator United Arts Council of Greater Greensboro.

American Express provided a grant that the council used to commission O'Connor to compose

the work.

"Sometimes you need something out of the ordinary to spark interest, and I think this will accomplish that, because of the subject matter and because of Mark," council President Tom Phillion says.

Phillion, who first crossed paths with O'Connor 30 years ago, offered him the "Queen Anne's Revenge" commission this spring. At first, O'Connor didn't know whether he could fit it into his schedule of concerts, rehearsals and travel.

"I thought I could do three minutes of an orchestral composition if I juggled some things around," O'Connor said.

"When I got into the piece, three minutes became six minutes because I was so excited about how it was developing."

Before composing, O'Connor researched Blackbeard and his flagship.

Capturing the pirate in orchestral music took nearly a month.

"You have these three kinds of moods that the

music evokes," O'Connor said. "The utter destruction of the attack, which is very noisy and very, almost nerve-wrackingly quiet, as if you were at sea and the sea is calm after the attack."

"Then there's this other kind of character, which I described as the pirate culture," O'Connor said. "It's a little bit slippery, a little bit of funkiness to it. It sort of represents pirates doing their thing in their off time, whether it's shining their gold or trading stories or coming ashore and going to saloons.

"And then there's the high-speed chase. ... That's the part that has the furious fiddling in it."

His score includes section notes for musicians such as "On the High Seas," "Sound of Alarm, Blackbeard's Ship Is Approaching" and "Blackbeard at the Tiller & Whipstaff."

"If a player plays music under that section and feels anything close to that, that is the kind of approach and playing description that is going to best produce the result," O'Connor said. "I want the musicians to enjoy the experience."

He hopes that the symphony will record it for broadcast on radio and the Internet.

The overture, O'Connor said, could lead to a full-length symphonic work on Blackbeard — if someone commissioned him to compose it.

"This could eventually be the first movement of a longer form, if people like it and come forward and want to hear more," he said.

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