



Savannah Music Festival opens with powerhouse pianist Lang Lang

Festival on track to set new attendance record

Posted: March 19, 2010 - 12:15am

By [Emily Goldman](#)



Music Director Robert Spano conducts the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Thursday night during the opening of the Savannah Music Festival at the Johnny Mercer Theatre. Richard Burkhart/Savannah Morning News



The Savannah Music Festival opened Thursday with Chinese superstar pianist Lang Lang and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra at the Johnny Mercer Theatre.

"It makes me want to pull out my ballet shoes and dance again," said Jeanne Paddison after watching Lang Lang perform. "He was very immersed in his work."

The music festival, which runs through April 3, is one of Savannah's biggest tourist draws and will include more than 100 performances at venues throughout the historic district.

The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, for its fifth festival performance, opened to a crowd of more than 2,400 people with Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5.

Lang Lang, set to perform at Carnegie Hall on Sunday, joined the orchestra for Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 2. Then, after a standing ovation, he finished with a passionate Chopin Mazurka encore.

[See more photos from this event.](#)

"He is really quite a showman," said Rob Gibson, the festival's executive and creative director.

The New York Times called 27-year-old Lang Lang the "hottest artist on the classical music planet," and Time Magazine named him among the 100 most influential people in the world in 2009.

"He's from the most populated country in the world, and he is one of the most well known musicians in his country," Gibson said. "He's a veritable rock star."

Nick Slade, 13, one of the younger audience members, wasn't quite as excited about the concert. He came at the request of his mom, Hope Slade.

"Music is very important to our lives," Hope Slade said. "(Nick) loves to sing and listen to music."

Nick rolled his eyes while quipping, "I don't like to sing."

"Well, only on YouTube," his mother said, laughing.

The duo traveled from New Mexico for the concert and the St. Patrick's Day festivities.

"We heard Lang Lang was one of the top pianists in the world and decided not to miss the chance," Hope Slade said.

This year's festival offers a diverse lineup of music. The concerts range from the classics to bluegrass and rock.

Mike Marshall's Big Trio and The Belleville Outfit shared a bill for two shows at the Charles H. Morris Center during opening day as well.

Michael Towson, a regular festival attendee, is going to only two shows this year - two very different shows.

He saw Thursday's classical concert and has tickets to see Chicago-based alt-rock band WILCO later this month.

"(We like) the diversity," Towson said. "It's eclectic."

Some other concerts in the lineup include The Del McCoury Band; the Emerson String Quartet; Bassekou Kouyate, a virtuoso on the West African lute; country star Patty Loveless and Savannah native Kristina Train.

"I think we have a boutique festival in the sense we have an amalgamation of different styles," Gibson said. "But it's the tip top in each style, at least artistically."

Despite a sluggish economy, ticket sales for the 2009 festival topped \$1 million, and Gibson said this year is on track to sell even more.

"We're on record pace (for ticket sales)," Gibson said. "If we have some strong sales in the next few weeks, it could be a banner year."