



Soprano Kaitlyn Lusk performs at the New Haven Symphony's "Emerald Isle" concert last year. Conductor Sarah Ioannides will bring the concert to the Tacoma Symphony on March 22. COURTESY PHOTO



- SONGS FROM THE EMERALD ISLE

Who: Tacoma Symphony, directed by Sarah Ioannides, with Kaitlyn Lusk (soprano), Trent Kowalik (tap) and Andrew Thomson (pipes)

When: 2:30 p.m. Sunday

Where: Pantages Theater, 901 Broadway, Tacoma

Tickets: From \$19; show may sell out

Information: 253-591-5894, broadwaycenter.org, tacomasympphony.org

Sarah Ioannides has already pulled some innovative ideas out of the classical box in her first year as director of the Tacoma Symphony: a world premiere percussion concerto, international soloists, and a pianist able to improvise a Chopin-esque prelude based on the audience's choice of theme.

This Sunday, she has another one: a concerto for tap dancer and orchestra. Along with "Lord of the Rings" singer Kaitlyn Lusk and piper Andrew Thomson, it's part of a St. Patrick's Day-themed concert in the Pantages that celebrates Irish music from classical to folk — music that Ioannides, with her British upbringing, loves.

"The main connection, obviously, was St. Patrick's Day," says Ioannides about "Songs from the Emerald Isle," a program she created and produced for a guest-conducting gig with the New Haven Symphony in Connecticut last year. "(But) the idea was to build a picture of Ireland through all these musical influences, from humorous drinking songs to beautiful landscapes."

Compositionally, those influences range from the late-Romantic style of early-20th-century Irish composer Sir Hamilton Harty, the dramatic orchestrations of contemporary Irish film composer Sean Davey, "Riverdance" composer Bill Whelan, folk-pop artist Enya and Australian composer Sean O'Boyle, whose colorful percussion concerto opened the TSO's season last year. O'Boyle has six arrangements of Irish tunes on Sunday's program, including "The Minstrel Boy" and "When Irish Eyes are Smiling" (an audience sing-along).

But it's instrumentally that Sunday's concert will really build a unique picture of Ireland. Soprano Kaitlyn Lusk, whose rich voice crosses easily from folk to Broadway to the "Lord of the Rings" Symphony, will sing Irish tunes from "O Danny Boy" to "Carrickfergus," plus Enya's "May It Be." Andrew Thomson, a Connecticut native who also plays percussion, will solo on both whistle and the Uilleann pipes (pronounced ill-ee-an), the traditional Irish reed pipes that make so distinctive and wistful a sound.

And then there's the tap concerto. While tap shoes aren't usually thought of as a musical instrument, there's plenty of precedent for using them that way: Morton Gould wrote a tap concerto in 1952, Rob Kapilow wrote another in 2007, and there's the world-famous percussion-dance group Stomp, which reimagined what tap could be. All use the percussive sound of tap shoes like a drum line — which is exactly what composer Kim Scharmberg had in mind when he composed "Tour de Tap" for Ioannides' New Haven concert last year.

"It's like a snare drum solo," says Scharmberg, who wrote the concerto for five-time American tap champion and Tony-winner Trent Kowalik, one of the three original Billys in the musical "Billy Elliott" and of Irish descent himself. "But I didn't want the dancer to do exactly what I write. It's more like an improv drum solo, open to interpretation."

Scharmberg's an experienced composer for orchestral pops concerts like this one, and his musical language in "Tour de Tap" is an easy-going blend of jazz, theater and occasional classical complexity. Harmonically, the score goes on a world-tour through syncopated, circus-y chromatics to Italianate string passages, an Irish jig, a tranquil Copland-esque oboe solo and a percussive ending. Throughout, the dancer pulses an energetic rhythm, merging into more balletic (and silent) dance in the slow movement before a wildly improvised cadenza and a duo with the actual orchestral percussion section.

"Tap's not a melodic instrument, so you're depending for interest on the choreography and the different sounds of shoes and hands," explains Scharmberg.

So how, exactly, does one even write down a tap concerto? Before he created the piece, Scharmberg had several sessions with Kowalik to learn just what this instrument was capable of.

"I asked him to show me a whole bunch of stuff, to teach me the language," he says. "We talked about notation — it's like a drum solo. It's a collaborative process, up to the individual with hand gestures and what you do during the cadenza."