

# Season Premier

Kevin McChesney

Ring of Fire

- I. RHYTHM OF FIRE, or Heaven and Earth
- II. SEA OF FIRE, or The Sea
- III. RING OF FIRE, or Fire

Pike's Peak Ringers, handbells

INTERMISSION

Gioacchino Rossini  
(1792-1868)

*An Italian in Algiers* Overture

Ludwig van Beethoven  
(1770-1827)

Symphony No. 7 in A Major, op. 92

- I. Poco sostenuto—Vivace
- II. Allegretto
- III. Presto
- I. Allegro con brio

**Kevin McChesney** graduated with highest honors from the University of Colorado at Boulder with a BMus in Composition and Theory. A composer and arranger of handbell music, Kevin currently has over 450 titles in print and is one of the very few musicians who makes handbells a full-time vocation. He has won numerous awards for his work, including American Guild of English Handbell Ringers Composition Contests and Jeffers Composer of the Year. Kevin was a church music director in Methodist and Presbyterian churches for 12 years. For 5 years, he was also accompanist and co-director for the vocal music department at Air Academy High School, where he co-directed a major production each fall season for 11 years. Kevin is currently the handbell editor for Jeffers Handbell Supply and the RingingWord catalog. He directs an auditioned community handbell choir, the Pikes Peak Ringers. He is also co-founder of the Solo To Ensemble Project, STEP, and authors a quarterly newsletter containing instruction and information for handbell programs, the Handbell Classroom. Both STEP and the Handbell Classroom can be found on the web at <http://www/stepproject.com>. He is in demand throughout the handbell world as a workshop clinician and festival conductor. Kevin lives in Colorado Springs, CO, with his wife Tracy and their cats, Belle and Grace Note.

The handbell choir as a musical endeavor has been in existence only a short time (since the 1950's) in comparison to other musical instruments. Until recently, handbells have been relegated largely to church services and school programs, where their development has been furthered but where there are by nature limits to the technical and musical possibilities for the instrument. There has been little to no material for the instrument which allows the handbell choir a full range of freedom and virtuosity. This was the starting point for **Ring of Fire, Concerto for Handbell Choir and Orchestra**.

The vision behind Ring of Fire, Concerto for Handbell Choir and Orchestra, is to bring the handbell choir fully into the view of a wide concert audience as a musical instrument of much expressive intricacy and power, much like Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez* (1939) did for the guitar. While the solo part is virtuoso music (and therefore not immediately accessible to the average handbell choir), McChesney's goal is to inspire higher achievement in handbell performance and composition, and to offer audiences an appreciation of this versatile instrument.

Though he had considered writing a major work for handbell ensemble and orchestra, McChesney had left the idea nebulous until he worked with a virtuoso handbell ensemble—The Ring Of Fire of Tualitin, Oregon, Jason Wells, Director, and knew that the time had come to bring the vision to life. With such a group in existence, an ensemble that has already “raised the bar” for the handbell world in many ways, the timing was right for the creation of the present concerto.

McChesney writes of the piece, “The music of the three movements has a central theme of creation. The subtitles - Heaven and Earth, The Sea, and Fire - are the four main elements of life and creation common to many mythologies and religions throughout history. Handbells themselves are cast from a form of these elements - earth and metal, oils and water, air and fire for molding and tempering - so a connection to the creation theme seemed natural. The main titles are also related to a creation theme, portraying first the rhythm and dance of the fires of creation, second the peace of fire, and finally the explosive energy of fire. It is hoped that these titles also make an elegant tribute to the handbell choir that inspired the completion of this project. I am deeply grateful to Jason Wells and The Ring Of Fire for their inspiration, and to all who support and further this artistic endeavor.”

*At the age of thirty-seven Rossini had written thirty-seven operas, and thirty-four of those had been produced within the space of fourteen years—not a bad record for a man who was regarded as constitutionally one of the laziest of mankind.—Ernest Newman*

**Gioacchino Rossini** (1792-1868) was born to musical parents—a trumpeter and a singer. His musical training started early, and shortly after his eighth birthday he composed his first opera. His first commission came when he was seventeen. In 1812, at the tender age of twenty, his music debuted at Italy’s most prestigious La Scala, and within a year Rossini was gaining fame beyond Italian borders. Soon he was appointed music director of the opera house of Naples. In 1822, Rossini married and traveled to Vienna immediately after. Some scholars assert that Rossini met Beethoven on that journey, but the truth of that meeting remains a mystery. In 1824, he moved to Paris, where he composed his most famous opera *Guillaume Tell*, but abruptly stopped composing after its completion. His only significant work after *Guillaume Tell* was his *Stabat Mater*, but even the acclaim of that work couldn’t return Rossini to full-time composition. Many scholars believe it was the newly-matured Verdi or the major developments of Wagner that persuaded Rossini to stop composing, but there is no doubt that Rossini dominated Italian opera in the first half of the nineteenth century.

After his successful debut at La Scala, Rossini wrote a serious opera, *Tancredi*, and followed in two months with the comic opera *L’Italiana in Algeri* (*The Italian Girl in Algiers*). It was written as a favor to Cesare Gallo, who had been left hanging by another composer and practically begged Rossini to come to the rescue of his troubled Teatro San Benedetto in Venice. The libretto, an established work by Angelo Anelli, received some minor revisions and it is believed that Rossini finished the entire score in just twenty-seven days. The premier was a huge success and *L’Italiana in Alegeri* is generally regarded as Rossini’s most successful comic opera. Coincidentally, the premier took place on May 22, 1813, the day of Richard Wagner’s

birth—perhaps a foreboding of the new currents in opera that would one day overshadow Rossini’s work.

*Keep your eye on him; he will make the world talk about him some day.*—Mozart, in a letter to his father dated 1787, after meeting Beethoven.

*Beethoven was the pillar of smoke that led to the Promised Land.*—Franz Liszt.

**Beethoven’s** time was one of revolutions and wars, terror and reform, poverty and extravagance and in many ways his music reflects the turbulence of the age in which he lived. Austria was at war with Ottoman Turkey, the French were in dispute with Austria, and England with France. The fall of the Bastille in 1789 was a sign of the end of the old order, extinguished forever. The period brought wide cultural changes, changes in political philosophy and society, and in the arts. Beethoven is seen as the bridge from the restraint and preoccupation with form of the Classical era, to the wildly personalized and emotional Romantic era.

Beethoven had a remarkable musical output. Just to name a few: 32 piano sonatas, 16 string quartets, 6 piano concerti plus a fragment (of which only 5 remain in the repertoire), 10 violin sonatas, 4 cello sonatas, 172 folk song arrangements, 60 canons and “musical jokes,” at least 2 ballets, an opera (“Fidelio”), and a large number of other works for chamber ensembles, choir, voice ... *and* 9 great symphonies that still represent the highest consistent level of symphonic output by any composer in history.

**Ludwig van Beethoven** was born in the provincial court city of Bonn, Germany, probably on December 16, 1770. Beethoven's talent was such that, at the age of 12, he was already assistant to the organist Christian Gottlob Neefe, with whom he studied. Attempts to establish him as a prodigy in the mold of Mozart had little success, however.

In 1787 Beethoven was sent to Vienna, but his mother fell ill, and he had to return to Bonn almost immediately. She died a few months later, and in 1789 Beethoven himself requested that his alcoholic father be retired, a move that left him responsible for his two younger brothers. Beethoven left Bonn for Vienna a second time in November of 1792, in order to study with Haydn.

In 1794 French forces occupied the Rhineland; consequently, Beethoven's ties with and support from the Bonn court came to an end. His father had died a month after his departure from Bonn, and his brothers joined him in Vienna. He remained there the rest of his life, leaving only for holidays and concerts in nearby cities. His only extended journey was to Prague, Dresden, and Berlin in 1796. Beethoven never held an official position in Vienna. He supported himself by giving concerts, by teaching piano, and increasingly through the sale of his compositions. Members of the Viennese aristocracy were his steady patrons, and in 1809 three of them—Prince

Kinsky, Prince Lobkowitz, and the Archduke Rudolph—even guaranteed him a yearly income with the sole condition that he remain in Vienna.

The last 30 years of Beethoven's life were shaped by a series of personal crises, the first of which was the onset of deafness. The early symptoms, noticeable to the composer already before 1800, affected him socially more than musically. His reaction was despair, resignation, and defiance. Resolving finally to "seize fate by the throat," he emerged from the crisis with a series of triumphant works that mark the beginning of a new period in his stylistic development.

A second crisis a decade later was the breaking off of a relationship with an unnamed lady (probably Antonie Brentano, the wife of a friend) known to us as the "Immortal Beloved," as Beethoven addressed her in a series of letters in July 1812. This was apparently the most serious of several such relationships with women who were in some way out of his reach, and its traumatic conclusion was followed by a lengthy period of resignation and reduced musical activity.

During this time Beethoven's deafness advanced to the stage that he could no longer perform publicly, and he required a slate or little notebooks (now known as "conversation books") to communicate with visitors. The death of his brother Caspar Carl in 1815 led to a 5-year legal struggle for custody of Caspar's son Karl, then 9 years old, in whom Beethoven saw a last chance for the domestic life that had otherwise eluded him. His possessiveness of Karl provoked a final crisis in the summer of 1826, when the young man attempted suicide. Shortly thereafter, Beethoven's health began to fail, and he died on March 26, 1827 in Vienna.

Beethoven started work on his **Symphony No. 7, op. 92** in the spring of 1812. The Napoleonic wars were wreaking havoc across Europe, Beethoven's deafness was far advanced, and he was agonizing over his love for a woman already married. Yet the piece was a triumphant success artistically and financially for Beethoven. It was premiered on December 8, 1813 at the University of Vienna, with Beethoven conducting, though it's doubtful that he could have heard any but the loudest passages. Nonetheless, the work shone for its brilliant orchestration—one of the most powerful of Beethoven's works but without a large orchestra needed for its highest points.