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## MEDIA RELEASE

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### ***Centuries of Concertos From Bach to Chris Thile***

**Robert Moody & The Festival Orchestra**

**Chris Thile, *Mandolin***

Thursday, February 24 at 7:30 p.m.

Pinnacle Presbyterian Church

25150 N. Pima Road, Scottsdale 85255

**Tickets:** \$40; Premium Seating \$55; Student (K-College) free

Call (480) 488-0806, toll free (866) 488-0806 or visit [www.azmusicfest.org](http://www.azmusicfest.org) for tickets.

Complimentary valet parking is available.

#### **Brandenburg Concerto No #2 in F Major**

*Allegro*

*Andante*

*Allegro assai*

#### **Johann Sebastian Bach**

(1685-1750)

**Ryan Anthony, *Trumpet*; Philip Dikeman, *Flute***

**Paloma Griffin, *Violin*; Neil Tatman, *Oboe***

#### **Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis**

#### **Ralph Vaughan Williams**

(1872-1958)

**Robin Mayforth & Corine Brouwer, *Violins***

**Janet Sims, *Viola*; Brant Taylor, *Cello***

*Intermission*

#### **Mandolin Concerto (Ad Astra Per Alas Porci)**

("To the stars on the wings of a pig")

*A March, A Waltz, and A Jig*

*Air on the F Train*

*The Fifth Glass*

#### **Chris Thile**

(Born 1981)

*Arizona Premiere*

**Chris Thile**

In 1721, German composer **Johann Sebastian Bach** (1685-1750) presented a collection of six concertos for chamber orchestra to the Margrave von Brandenburg. The gift was not acknowledged, nor did Bach receive any payment for his efforts. The six concertos *were* performed in Cöthen, where Bach was Kappellmeister (music

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director) for the music-loving Prince Leopold, who maintained an extensive musical establishment. These proficient musicians allowed Bach's technically difficult and intriguing compositions to be heard and appreciated.

The Brandenburg concertos were written in *concerto grosso* form, which calls for two separate instrumental groups. The larger, called the *ripieno* (reinforcing section) or *tutti* (lit. "all"), is made up of a string section and *basso continuo* (a repeated rhythmic ground that provides a supporting bass line), scored for cello and harpsichord. The smaller group, the *concertino* ("little concert group") consist of soloists. The number of soloists and instruments varies from one concerto to another. The *Second Brandenburg Concerto* calls for violin, oboe, flute (originally, a recorder) and piccolo trumpet (originally a clarin or natural trumpet). Interestingly, highly skilled trumpeters in the early 18<sup>th</sup> Century developed a virtuoso style, called *clarion*, which enabled them to play extremely rapid passages in a very high register on the Baroque trumpet. Today's piccolo trumpet is the valved instrument equivalent to the clarin. As will quickly become evident, the trumpet part for this concerto is one of the most difficult in the entire repertoire.

As is typical in Baroque concertos, The First and Third Movements have fast tempos and the Second Movement is slow. In the First Movement, the soloists (*concertino*) and the orchestra (*ripieno*) play a full statement of the first theme together. That melody is repeated between solo passages for one or more of the *concertino* group. Next, a second theme is introduced by the each soloist in turn and is played exclusively by the smaller ensemble for all eight repeats. This "return" of thematic material is called *ritornello*, for obvious reasons!

The lovely short theme of the Second Movement is played by only three of the *concertino* --violin, oboe and flute -- along with the obligatory basso continuo. The *ripieno* (orchestra) is not heard at all! Any idea why the trumpet does not appear in this movement? It's simple: the second movement in most concertos is in a different key from the first and third in order to create a contrast in sound and harmony. In 1721, however, no trumpet could make a key change because it was a natural instrument and had no valves.

In the final movement, the trumpet more than makes up for its absence in the previous section. It leads the way from the very first, followed by the oboe, violin and then the flute, as the theme appears in a compelling fugal statement. Finally, the *ripieno* joins in the merriment! What a happy whirl for the chamber orchestra! What a tour de force for the soloists!

Some interesting tidbits about this work: the *Brandenburg No. 2* is the first piece on the Golden Record placed aboard the Voyager 1 and 2 spacecrafts in 1977. Along with natural sounds from Earth, scientific pictures and diagrams, the record contained numerous examples of music, including *three* excerpts by Bach, more than any other composer or group. Perhaps you remember the famous cartoon commenting about the selection. The caption read: "Send more Chuck Berry." The *Concerto* was notably used as the theme for William F. Buckley's program, *Firing Line*. And finally, if you need one more "hit" of this amazing work, just watch a rerun of the *X-Files* episode, "Little Green Men." While characters discuss the Voyager Golden Record, the *Brandenburg No. 2* can be heard in the background. Granted, it is not tonight's gorgeous performance, but it surely *will* bring back memories of this extraordinary work played so beautifully by our Festival Orchestra, under the baton of Maestro Robert Moody.

The *Harvard Dictionary of Music* defines a *fantasia* as "a composition in which 'free flights of fancy' prevail over conventions of form." The term is also applied to improvisations based on works composed earlier. And there we have a completely unsatisfactory technical description of the inspiring *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* by **Ralph Vaughan Williams** (1872-1958).

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Well then, what *is* this amazing, moving composition? It is indeed based on a previous tune, “*Why Fumeth in Fight?*” by the English composer/organist Thomas Tallis. Written in 1567 for a Psalter (an English version of the *Book of Psalms*), it was discovered by Vaughan Williams while editing *The English Hymnal*. (It is of some interest that Vaughan Williams, a self-declared agnostic, wrote many choral religious works of great beauty.)

The work is scored for two string orchestras and a string quartet. The orchestral groups are of unequal size; thus, unequal strength. The larger one introduces and states the three themes. The smaller unit echoes or acts as a chorus, quietly reiterating the materials. They alternate, then join with the solo quartet. The different, distinctive sounds of each ensemble produce strong contrasts in texture, while weaving a fabric of repeated themes that becomes hypnotic and ever more wonderfully familiar as the piece continues. The alternation among the three groups gives the entire work a sense of an evolving dialogue.

The first theme, and the one most often heard, is a swaying motif, introduced by warm chords and pizzicato (plucked) strings. A seeming response to this surging, wavering theme follows, then a third melody, this one a modal phrase consisting of seven notes. All three instrumental groups explore the themes. Every time, we are led back to the original Tallis music by way of yet another innovative transformation.

Vaughan Williams filled the score with specific performance instructions: *cantabile*, *espressivo*, *animato*, and more. They indicate that the marvelous diverse moods and varying depths of emotion are all integral to the composer’s musical vision, which the musicians transform into orchestral dynamics, harmonic textures and rhythms. The true depth of the *Fantasia* is particularly apparent when heard in a church, as we hear it tonight. The orchestral “choir” produces a majestic fullness of sound, while the string quartet seems to personalize the music. Even more: the “reduced” sound of the four solo string voices reinforces the emotional impact of the expressive materials so magnificently stated by the two larger groups. As kids today say, “Awesome!”

The *Mandolin Concerto* by American **Chris Thile** (born 1981) is very personal music of *today*. Its musical language explores the timbres of the orchestra’s instruments, while allowing the soloist to perform this delightful, captivating composition with amazing virtuosic intensity. The *Concerto* is personal in that the music is utterly original in its bold orchestral color, its mostly non-melodic materials, and its constant juggling of rhythmic effects. The work is indeed structured as a Classical concerto, but its sound is complex, born out of the composer’s understanding of the past that he has translated into a present-day musical idiom. The *Mandolin Concerto* is a riveting and intriguing addition to concert performance music. (Now, if we can just get Mr. Thile to explain the subtitle....)

It should be noted here that in “olden times” – the Baroque, Classical and yes, even Romantic eras -- it was usual for a composer to perform as soloist in his own works. Today’s performance with Chris Thile harkens back to this custom. In fact, the entire *Concerto* looks back to the compositional model epitomized by Johann Sebastian Bach. A fervent admirer of the Baroque master, Thile’s deep-seated enthusiasm for his music can be detected in the *Concerto*’s tightly constructed score, the highlighting of solo instruments from the orchestra to add varied texture, the use of contrapuntal techniques, and multiple rhythmic patterns.

The First Movement is filled with short motifs that are quite dissonant yet firmly within the context of tonality. The music sets off, marches and halts, whispers and shouts, becomes waltz-like and drifts a while, which allows several orchestral instruments to wander through the material. Here, the piano in particular has major responsibilities; the warmth of the viola is also clearly heard. Dialogues between instruments enrich the texture as the mandolin passages lead the way. The mood is quixotic, sometimes emphatic, sometimes melancholy; always fresh! The concluding cadenza is nothing short of miraculous!

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The Second Movement translates the sounds and speed of a rushing NYC subway car, while cheekily giving the section a Baroque (or even earlier) designation. Off to a quiet start, the woodwinds, solo viola, and wonderful piano passages combine to give us the full impact of the train's acceleration and its eventual return to a slower, more leisurely pace. As always, the mandolin interrupts the orchestra, then joins to weave its magical, feathery tone into the musical fabric.

Enjoy the vigorous syncopation of the final Movement! There is a definite nod to jazz in this part, even a spare, Stravinsky-like reference to the jagged, compelling rhythms of this all-American music. You'll also find a hint of bluegrass, the music with which the composer has been identified for so long. Once again, solo instruments -- particularly the piano, cello and viola plus emphatic beats from the timpani -- are heard. *And*, you can be sure the virtuoso mandolin is ever-present, demanding our attention! The orchestra and the artful fingers of Chris Thile on his mandolin strut forward as they propel the *Concerto* to its stunning conclusion.

### *Notes by Fran Rosenthal*

#### *About Tonight's Soloists*

Please turn to page 36 for a biography of trumpeter **Ryan Anthony**. For biographies of the other featured musicians, please turn to pages 53-66, where they will be found with their Festival Orchestra colleagues.

Widely regarded as one of the most interesting and inventive musicians of his generation, **Chris Thile** has changed the mandolin forever. Single-handedly, he has elevated the instrument from its origins as a relatively simple folk and bluegrass instrument (notwithstanding Vivaldi's two 18<sup>th</sup> Century concertos) to the sophistication and brilliance of the finest jazz improvisation and classical performance.

For more than 15 years, Thile played in the wildly popular band Nickel Creek, with whom he released three albums, was awarded a Grammy® in 2002, and traveled the world on sold-out concert tours. His latest band, Punch Brothers, has performed for SRO audiences in a dizzying array of venues and garnered great critical acclaim despite its young age. In 2007, Thile's four-movement chamber piece, *The Blind Leaving the Blind*, was premiered by the band at Carnegie Hall and later recorded for their debut album, *Punch*. Their most recent recording, *Antifogmatic*, was released last year.

As a soloist, Thile has released four albums, on which he conquered a dizzying range of instruments, songwriting challenges and musical styles. He has also performed and recorded extensively as a duo with double bass virtuoso Edgar Meyer (with whom he released an album and toured the world in the fall of 2008) and with fellow eminent mandolinist Mike Marshall. In April 2007, Meyer and pianist Emanuel Ax commissioned Thile to write a piece for double bass and piano, which they performed on a tour including the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, and the Schermerhorn Symphony Center in Nashville. Additionally, Thile has collaborated with a pantheon of bluegrass innovators including Bela Fleck, Dolly Parton, the Dixie Chicks, Jerry Douglas, and Sam Bush. This is his first appearance at *Arizona Musicfest*.

*This evening of concerto brilliance is partially sponsored  
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