Hornist Jeff Nelsen to open
Kent/Blossom faculty series on July 1

by Daniel Hathaway

With an eclectic program that reflects his unbelievably varied background and range of activities, Canadian-born horn player Jeff Nelsen will be featured in the opening concert of this year's Kent/Blossom Festival on Wednesday, July 1 at 7:30 pm in Ludwig Recital Hall on the Kent State University campus. Nelsen will share the stage with his wife, mezzo-soprano Nina Yoshida Nelsen, and pianist Elizabeth DeMio.

When I spoke with Nelsen by telephone with his biography in my hand, I confessed that I had no idea where to start in asking about his life and career. "Let's start with the pig farming and move on!" he said. "Dad grew up on the farm in Alberta and got a grant to study voice in Toronto, where he met my mom. After singing opera and Broadway, they moved back to the farm, had my two older sisters and me, and kept singing."

Jeff Nelsen went on to play in the horn sections of "dozens of orchestras," including New York, Los Angeles, Boston, Chicago, Cincinnati, Montreal, and St. Louis, toured for eight seasons with Canadian Brass, played the first runs of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* and *The Pirate Queen* on Broadway, toured with Michael Bublé, and Barenaked Ladies, and played gigs with Slavic Soul Party. He now teaches horn at the Jacobs School at Indiana University.

While teaching at the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara, California, Jeff Nelsen met his future wife. "She was singing Brahms songs with a friend of mine." Those songs, originally for low voice and viola, will also figure the Nelsens' concert on

Wednesday. "We met through the Brahms songs. Instead of giving my chops a rest at that point in the program, I'll be playing the viola part on horn."

"The entire program is a journey through Nina's and my relationship," Nelsen said, adding that it includes a selection of songs that invoke memories and connections. "Gershwin's *Summertime* is a piece Nina sings a lot, as did my mom. Richard Strauss's *Alphorn* (for soprano, horn, and piano) is about trying to connect with a distant love; it reflects our three-year, long-distance marriage when she was teaching in Philadelphia and I was at IU. There's also *Remembering the Future*, a piece for voice, horn, and piano by my student Ryan O'Connell, with lyrics by Brian Andreas of StoryPeople. Ryan, who is now in L.A. writing for TV shows, loves Broadway as much as I do. The second movement is like "Defying Gravity" from *Wicked*. The lyrics are so powerful I had to stop the first time we played it, because Nina was several months' pregnant."

The Nelsens' program will also include a medley of Leonard Bernstein tunes — which changes slightly each time they perform them. "We're trying to find a flow for the suite, and there are so many beautiful choices. Liz (DeMio) and I will begin with "A Simple Song" from *Mass*, which I first heard when we recorded it with Canadian Brass. It really stuck with me. Then we'll move on to "One hand, one heart," and "There's a place for us," and end with "Tonight."

Jeff Nelsen will also play more standard music for the horn, like Václav Nelhybel's *Scherzo Concertante*, "a short, exciting concert opener," and Nina Nelsen will sing

Camille Saint-Saëns's "Mon Coeur" from *Samson et Dalila*. "Nina has a huge, dramatic mezzo voice, and this is a very powerful aria."

While visiting the Kent/Blossom Festival, Jeff Nelsen will also be coaching students in chamber music, and one of the topics will be "[Fearless Performance](#)," an approach to playing in public that has developed into a TEDx talk and a series of four-day workshops led by the hornist. "I can talk forever about that. As a performer, I got tired of walking onstage ready to give my best and walking off feeling that I hadn't. It's not about overcoming fear but replacing it. You don't go out there to avoid mistakes or show off, but to give a piece of yourself. Students don't see the difference between what they can do and what they actually do onstage. There's a real process involved."

Nelsen recently worked with a percussionist who was preparing for an audition with one of the top American orchestras. "He called and said that he was getting very close, but he needed more ideas about what to do. We worked on how to really dive in and make his performance as good as possible." It worked — he won the position.

Another recent interest of Jeff Nelsen's is magic — and he's become a member of the Academy of Magical Arts. Having read that he occasionally incorporates some of those skills into his performances, I asked him if Wednesday evening's audience might expect some magic tricks — rabbits out of hats? "It's hard to fly with livestock or explosives," he said, "but there's a very high chance of some illusionary arts being displayed."

Kent/Blossom faculty and guest concerts will continue on Monday, July 6 with the Miami String Quartet and pianist Spencer Myer, followed on Wednesday, July 8 by Cleveland Orchestra principal cello Mark Kosower with pianist Jee-Won Oh. Rossini's opera *La Cambiale di Matrimonio* will be presented on Saturday afternoon, July 18. On Sunday, July 19, pianist Stanislav Khristenko, first prize winner at the 2013 Cleveland International Piano Competition, will perform a solo recital. KSU piano professor Jerry Wong will be featured in a recital with members of The Cleveland Orchestra on Wednesday, July 22, and KSU faculty oboist Danna Sundet will join other members of the Orchestra in a concert on Wednesday, July 29.

This year's Kent/Blossom Festival will include a total of seven student recitals beginning on Friday, July 10 and ending on July 27. Additionally, Brett Mitchell will lead the Kent/Blossom Chamber Orchestra in a Blossom prelude concert and side-by-side concert with Jahja Ling and The Cleveland Orchestra on Saturday, August 1 (prelude at 7:00 pm, concert at 8). Check the ClevelandClassical concert listings for dates and repertoire.

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