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The Perfect Musical Picnic

Free music mixed with Chicago summer nights? 'Tis the season.

Monday Jun 23, 2008. By [Erin Brereton](#)

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photo: [Erin Brereton](#)

The free weekly concerts at Millennium Park—collectively known as the Grant Park Music Festival, which has been around since the Depression and is the nation's only remaining free, outdoor classical music series—are one of those warm-weather activities I always mean to do. Somehow, it rarely ends up happening.

So, determined to get this summer off to a solid start, I folded up my best picnic blanket, packed up my cooler and headed to the Jay

Pritzker Pavilion last Wednesday with three friends for the concert-in-the-park experience.

The show starts at 6:30; my friend Mary and I got there about an hour beforehand, which was good; the venue was already over half full. My friend Stef, back from Baltimore for the summer, was next to arrive. She hasn't been here for more than a few days since Christmas, and she's still adjusting to the magic of a Chicago that's not coated in five inches of snow.

And what a Chicago that is! By the time my friend Rachel had arrived, we'd already cracked open the wine and snacks. "Are we allowed to drink this outside?" Stef asked, incredulously. Mary nodded, and poured her a plastic cup of Sauvignon Blanc. (I felt a little pompous eating wine and cheese in a park—until I noticed the women behind us had set up a small table, complete with tablecloth. Next time I will bring a candelabra).

The program we heard was called "Take a Friend to the Orchestra" (see, I follow instructions) and included a nice sampler selection of classical music from composers like Wagner, Mozart and Debussy. Each piece was introduced by the lively conductor, who was quick to point out if a song—like the evening's first selection, "The Ride of the Valkyries"—was featured in a movie (in that case, "Apocalypse Now") or known for another reason.

For the most part, the pieces were ones I think most people would recognize—though I didn't expect such a huge audience reaction. The "Overture to William Tell" garnered such an extended ovation that several people got up and left afterward, assuming the show was over (there were still two more pieces on the program).

The show's real standout was the "Adagio for Strings"—turns out it's one of Stef's favorites, and I see why. Sitting there in the cool night breeze, I couldn't imagine a better place to hear a piece that delicate and sweet (which, coincidentally, is also how I would describe the wine I was drinking at the time. A can't-miss combo!).

After the show finished, we decided to stay for a few minutes. That turned into an hour of laughing, talking about the perfect weather, staring at the skyline and discussing how much we preferred Millennium Park to the sunken den of train tracks it used to be. (No offense, sunken den of train tracks.) We weren't the only ones. At least a half dozen other groups hung out after the show while



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the crew bustled around cleaning up, and it couldn't have been more enjoyable or more relaxing. We talked about going across the street to a bar, but realized we still had wine, and, as Mary said, "This is free."

And then, when—after turning to look for the source of a loud popping noise—we realized we could also see the Wednesday night fireworks exploding over Navy Pier, we all just leaned back in amazement. Summer may come late in this city, but it never arrives empty-handed; let's hope that fall doesn't feel any rush to return.

Want to check out a free concert? The park hosts them on Fridays and Saturdays sometimes, too. For a full listing, visit <http://www.grantparkmusicfestival.com/schedule.shtml>.

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