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Trumpeter is the highlight of a concert featuring ‘West Side Story’ themes

By [Andrew Meacham](#)



Trumpeter Hakan Hardenberger will solo with the Florida Orchestra in *Aerial*, a trumpet concerto written for him by

composer HK Gruber. Photo by Marco Borggreve, courtesy of Hakan Hardenberger.

TAMPA — Leonard Bernstein would have turned 100 this year. The Florida Orchestra performed two of his works Friday, the second of which paired the dances from *West Side Story* with the overture to Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet*.

The orchestra dedicated the second half to Pinellas Park Civic Orchestra trombonist Caroline Morton-Hicks, who was fatally shot Monday, and victims of the Broward County school shooting. In so doing, music director Michael Francis noted themes of "love and all things wonderful, but also tragedy" in both works.

The evening began with a commissioned fanfare by University of Miami professor Dorothy Hindman, who told the audience she designed her celebratory piece around her backyard orchids. *Orchids Grow Here* resonates brightly with bells and brass, with what seems like dozens of motifs climbing simultaneously upward. There is a disorganized exuberance in it — simultaneous melodic passages, no two of them exactly alike. Playful touches include the growl of a trombone and a faint echo of wind chimes.

Bernstein's *Preludes, Fugues and Riffs* is an eight-minute salute to jazz in three short continuous sections. The small ensemble begins with brass alone, then moves to a fugue for five saxophones. The sections grow more complex as bass saxophone and percussion weigh in alongside xylophone and the racing clarinet of principal Natalie Hoe.

Hoe lets loose in the third section, *Riffs for Everyone*, knifing through treacherous waters like a champion surfer as the pace gallops. The piece stops on a dime, suddenly buttoned up, its last gleaming cuff link in place and ready to leave.

Impressive as that is, the most astonishing work follows in HK Gruber's *Aerial*, a concerto for trumpet and orchestra written 20 years ago specifically for soloist Hakan Hardenberger. This concert marks the 78th time Hardenberger has performed the piece, which tests the physical limits of a trumpeter and even the instrument itself.

Based on the Emily Dickinson poem *Wild Nights*, the piece begins with dissonant pangs, sounds created by simultaneously playing and singing into a trumpet. Over the course of two movements (or "aerial views"), the demands only increase as Hardenberger repeatedly changes and modifies instruments. Strings groaned as he switched to a cow horn in a kind of musical incantation, then attached a series of mutes. He removed slides from the trumpet, switched to piccolo trumpet, blasted through some fast sections and made further adjustments, often in the direction of making his instrument even harder to play. Some passages grate, others soar. It is a work of stirring strangeness played by possibly the world's best trumpeter. It ended on a long, sustained note, an unanswered question.

The orchestra moved with assurance into the *Overture-Fantasy* from *Romeo and Juliet*, from its opening cinematic foglike overtones to the familiar love theme. The musicians are most in their element playing this core repertoire, whether in a dialogue between cello and oboe or diving into thematic complications with a full orchestra.

The mood shifts with *Symphonic Dances from West Side Story*, dance numbers from the musical edited into a concert piece. Musicians snapping their fingers leads into strains from *Jet Song*. The introductory edges were all there. Could they be sharper, more pronounced? All the familiar accoutrements show up too — the

bongo drums, the police whistle, the shouted "Mambo!" as the number begins — as are sweeping segues into *Somewhere*, *Maria*, *Cool* and more.

Every time you wonder whether it's as good as the soundtrack, the orchestra picks up the volume and stops those thoughts. It ends on a somber, almost funereal note, as does the Tchaikovsky piece based on the same story, and the reasoning for the pairing becomes apparent.

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