

Michael Runyan will appear with the Omaha Symphony

BY JOHN PITCHER WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

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By day, he's a mild-mannered music librarian at the Indianapolis Symphony. By night, he's a red-hot harmonica player.

Huh?

You heard right. Michael Runyan is a serious composer, arranger, performer, music calligrapher and teacher who has a day job working as an orchestra librarian. But he also plays a mean chromatic harmonica.

"I've known Mike for years, but until recently I had no idea he played harmonica," said Thomas Wilkins, music director of the Omaha Symphony. "He showed me a clip of him playing harmonica at an Indianapolis Christmas concert, and it turned out that he was actually a phenomenal artist on this instrument."

Runyan is so good that Wilkins decided to build a program around him for this Saturday's symphony concert at the Holland Performing Arts Center.

The concert will feature Runyan playing a couple of pieces that lend themselves naturally to the harmonica - Leroy Anderson's "Bugler's Holiday" and Dmitri Kabalevsky's "Galop" from "The Comedians," Op. 26.

"The Anderson, of course, is a great pops piece, and the Kabalevsky 'Galop' is a romp," said Wilkins. "They both sound great on harmonica."

But what about Clair de lune?

Claude Debussy's popular miniature is one of the most atmospheric works ever written for solo piano. You have to wonder, though, "How will it sound in an arrangement for harmonica and orchestra?"

"Absolutely beautiful," Wilkins said. "I wanted Mike to play at least one piece that wasn't quite so, well, shtickish. And I think people will be surprised at how gorgeous the harmonica can sound."

Saturday's program will include several other appealing and familiar works: Johann Strauss Jr.'s "Tales from the Vienna Woods," Op. 325; Edvard Grieg's "Lyric Suite," Op. 54; George Enesco's "Rumanian Rhapsody No. 1 in A major," Op. 11; and Tchaikovsky's "Waltz" from "The Sleeping Beauty Suite," Op. 66a.

"The music is all romantic and just right for Valentine's Day," Wilkins said.