

TOUR DES DAMES!



Music of the Grand Salon

Kerry Stratton

MUSIC'S RETURN TO A GENTLER ERA

By LAURA WRIGHT

Hot on the heels of its very successful 60th anniversary season, the Brockville Concert Association is entering its fall season with a concert by the Grand Salon, Canada's Palm Court Orchestra, which has played to sold-out crowds across Ontario.

The Grand Salon, led by internationally acclaimed conductor Kerry Stratton, performs light orchestral music and specializes in the music of the 1920s and '30s. Founded in 2006 by Kerry, the 21-piece Grand Salon is quickly developing a reputation for recreating a bygone era of elegance and opulence.

But don't let the word "orchestra" fool you. Unlike a symphony orchestra where you're expected to sit quietly and reverently, salon music is meant to move you – literally. The music ranges from light and happy to poignant and bittersweet. But above all else it is familiar, featuring composers such as Berlin, Porter, Strauss and Gershwin.

So if you think that you're stuck sitting in your seat, quietly wiggling your toes to the music, think again. Humming

is highly encouraged, as are other forms of artistic expression. "We've had audiences move chairs out of the way and dance," laughs Kerry. "And that's great."

Salon orchestras, also known as Palm Court orchestras, first started to gain popularity in the 1890s. It was a gentler era, a time when ladies dressed in evening gowns and white gloves for dinner and men wore tuxedos. Palm Courts, which inspired the term "Palm Court music," were opulent restaurants in the grand hotels like the Savoy and the Ritz in London and the Plaza in New York. Characterized by elaborate chandeliers, breathtaking skylights and, of course, palm trees, Palm Courts were gathering places for the rich and famous. People went there to see and be seen, to eat, mingle and dance.

Salon orchestras were found in all the first-class restaurants, palm courts, theatres and other venues where the rich and famous gathered. The music was intended to provide the backdrop to exquisite meals and scintillating conversation, and typical programs were drawn from light classics, musical theatre and the most popular songs of the day. Even the trans-Atlantic ocean liners had their own on-board salon orchestras, the most famous of which continued to play as the Titanic sank.

As if the music of the Grand Salon weren't enough to draw you in, Kerry has a reputation for being a superb showman. He has been described as being "as entertaining as the orchestra he leads," "a master storyteller" and "a gem onstage." Kerry has been quoted as saying that if there's anything he can't abide, it's a boring concert, and he does his best to make sure that audiences are kept entertained from beginning to end.

"Kerry Stratton has the pizzazz that classical music needs," says Barbara Johnston of the Brockville Concert Association, which is responsible for bringing the Grand Salon to Brockville. "We need more people like him – people who are dedicated to keeping good-quality music alive."

Ask Kerry why he formed the Grand Salon, and he'll tell you that he was trying to recreate a piece of "North Americana." The Grand Salon brings to life the music of a gentler age in music when, as Kerry explains, it was cherished and wasn't a disposable commodity. "The salon era was a time before radio, and it was a time when music was consumed live."

Although Kerry is also the conductor and musical director of the Toronto Philharmonia, the orchestra-in-residence at the Toronto Centre for the Arts, and has

conducted orchestras around the world, he readily admits that the Grand Salon is his delight. "It was an era before Muzak, when music was listened to and provided the backdrop for gracious living."

Salon music might be a departure from the "high-brow" symphony music that Kerry usually works with, but he nonetheless brings his signature quest for perfection with him. "I had a great time researching the original scores," he says, "so the songs are played exactly as they would have been at the time."

But no matter how good the conductor or the arrangements of the songs, music is nothing without the musicians. "Kerry has access to the right musicians

for this. He has experienced, classically trained performers who are among the elite of the music world," says Barbara. "Kerry is in high demand as a conductor, so to have him and performers of this caliber here is very exciting."

Tickets for the Grand Salon, Canada's Palm Court Orchestra, go on sale at the Brockville Arts Centre in July. **RL**

