

Song of the Prairie

Music echoes across the
Flint Hills during an annual
Kansas City Symphony
performance

BY SHEILA SCARBOROUGH



It was a moment I'll never forget.


While I was enjoying the Kansas City Symphony's rousing performance of Western tunes and classics from the Great American Songbook on an open prairie in the Flint Hills of Kansas—which is unusual enough in itself—a herd of cattle appeared over the hill behind the band shell. As the music soared, cowboys drove the cattle across the grassland. It was like being part of a living pioneer soundtrack.

This was no simple musical performance. It was an immersive experience for all the senses, and for years I had wanted to see for myself what it was like. Tickets were always sold out by the time I really focused on buying them, but several years ago I pounced as soon as tickets became available, and I'm glad I did.

The Symphony in the Flint Hills showcases the Kansas City Symphony in a different Flint Hills location each year to help people learn about and appreciate the tallgrass prairie. In its 17th iteration, this year's event will unfold on Saturday, June 11, on private ranchland known as Irma's Pasture, near Bazaar.




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Horseback riders and cattle enhance the event's prairie atmosphere.

This part of Kansas looks like the setting for *Little House on the Prairie*, especially the rolling, largely treeless grasslands stretching far to the horizon on either side of the Flint Hills National Scenic Byway. Less than 4% remains of the 170 million acres of tall-grass prairie that once extended from Canada's Saskatchewan province down into Texas.

Most of the Flint Hills region was never farmed because homesteaders discovered that the limestone and chert, commonly known as flint, near the soil's surface made plowing difficult, and the land is now used primarily for cattle ranching. As you drive through, at first glance it might seem as if there's nothing much to see, but actually, hundreds of plant species, birds, reptiles, and amphibians—plus more than 30 species of mammals, including bison—call the prairie's undulating hills home.

True to its goal, the Symphony in the Flint Hills immerses you in the area's ecology and history, and while each event is unique, many of the elements are the same every year. When I attended at the Deer Horn Ranch, the theme was the 150th anniversary of the Chisholm Trail; this year's theme focuses on the region's widely ranging weather.

After we parked our cars, friendly greeters on horseback directed me and other guests toward a tented area. All



The Kansas City Symphony begins its performance just before the sun begins setting.

afternoon before the evening performance, presentations in multiple tents focused on topics related to Kansas, the Flint Hills, and the Chisholm Trail. Taking a hay bale for a seat in the "Blue Wild Indigo" tent, I learned about Native Americans on the trail and in the Flint Hills.

Guided walks around sections of the prairie shined a light on its flora and fauna, and covered-wagon rides offered a taste of travel on a "prairie schooner." I strolled through tent galleries featuring artworks celebrating the Flint Hills, and local astronomers brought their telescopes out for daytime and nighttime viewing. All of these activities are expected to be part of this year's event.

Don't forget to pick up a Field Journal at the on-site store or order one online from the event website. This commemorative yearbook is filled with stunning photographs, illustrations, and articles



Guests can experience history on covered-wagon rides.

about the current year's theme and the Flint Hills.

The symphony program always begins around 6:45 p.m. I didn't stake out a seat close to the band shell, but no matter. The sight lines and sound were fine from just about any angle. I plunked down \$5 to rent a folding chair to set up "any ol' where" and let the music wash over me.

After a hot, very windy afternoon (be sure to bring a hat, sunglasses, and sunscreen), the sun dipping below the horizon during the show was a relief.

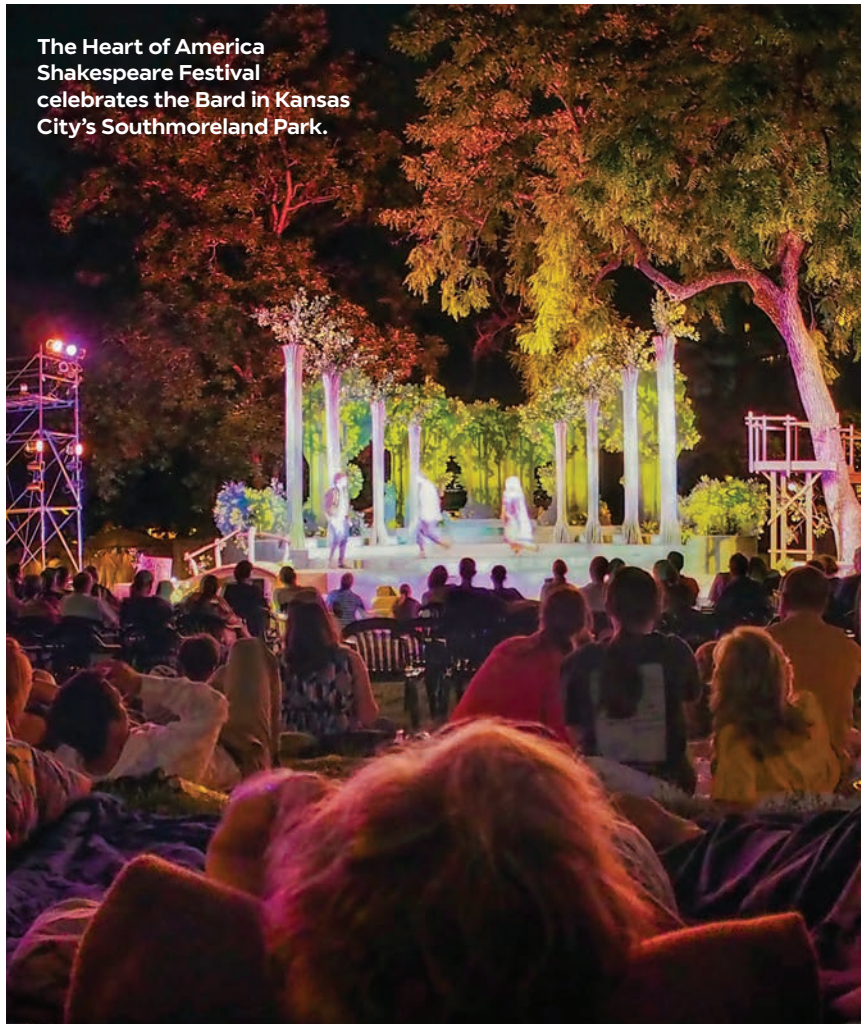
The festivities didn't end after the symphony played its last note. Post-concert activities typically include cowboy poetry, harmonica music, stargazing, and a dance with a live band.

I felt a little silly flying all the way to Kansas from Texas for an outdoor concert, but the gorgeous, achingly green surroundings and a heartfelt performance by the symphony's musicians made the trip well worth the effort. As I boarded the plane in Manhattan, Kansas, to return home—still finding bits of hay that had somehow ended up inside my purse—I realized I had never even opened the laptop that I'd lugged along with me. I had relaxed and was so entertained that my attention never wavered from the music, the hills, and the memorable moments.

Adults, \$95. (620) 273-8955; *symphony intheflinthills.org*.

SHEILA SCARBOROUGH is a contributor from Round Rock, Texas.

The Heart of America Shakespeare Festival celebrates the Bard in Kansas City's Southmoreland Park.



Footlights & Fireflies

Two outdoor festivals in Missouri that have long put their own spin on William Shakespeare's declaration that "all the world's a stage" will once again celebrate the Bard after canceling productions or limiting audiences in the last 2 years.

The festivals on opposite sides of the state present Shakespeare plays each summer with free evening performances under the stars. Fans bring blankets, chairs, and sometimes their own picnic fare to enjoy while taking in the intrigue, pathos, mirth, anger, deceit, and—especially this year—love.

In its 30th season, the Heart of America Shakespeare Festival in Kansas City will present *Romeo and Juliet* from June 14 through July 3 in Southmoreland Park near the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Dedicated to making the works of Shakespeare and Shakespeare-inspired plays accessible, the festival offers educational programs to children, teens, and adults year-round in addition to the summer drama. For details, visit kcshakes.org.

And the St. Louis Shakespeare Festival will mark its 22nd summer of shows in Forest Park with *Much Ado About Nothing*. The drama will be presented at 8 p.m. Tuesdays through Sundays from June 1 through 26 in Shakespeare Glen, a natural amphitheater in the park. Additionally, the festival will stage *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 24 parks across the St. Louis metropolitan area at 6:30 p.m. Tuesdays through Sundays from August 2 through 27. For more details, visit stlshakes.org.

» DENNIS R. HEINZE

FROM TOP LEFT: BILL HARRISON; ZACH ANDREWS