

# THE HAWK EYE

*Iowa's Oldest Newspaper*

\$2.50

## Holy Wow, Pianoman!

### McDonough rings in Christmas and a lot more.

**BOB SAAR**  
For The Hawk Eye

Let's jump to the coda: "Christmas with Jim McDonough and His Orchestra" is the best holiday concert we've seen in a long, long time.

Thanks to Burlington Civic Music, McDonough and his musicians returned to Memorial Auditorium for their third time on Saturday.

Christmas concerts should be upbeat, not somber; joyful, not mournful; energetic,

not morgue-like.

Jim McDonough and his band were all of that and more.

Truly a Christmas celebration.

"We are so happy to have Jim and his 16-piece orchestra for Christmas," BCM president Kay Conrad said before the show. "They have been practicing all afternoon and it is going to be a wonderful, wonderful Christmas."

"I'm thrilled to be back in Burlington," McDonough said.

"This is our first time



**Pianist Jim McDonough performs "Christmas with Jim McDonough and His Orchestra" on Saturday night at Burlington Memorial Auditorium. The show, brought by Burlington Civic Music Association, featured McDonough and his 16-piece band. This was McDonough's third appearance in Burlington in his 21-year career. (Bob Saar/For The Hawk Eye)**

here in nine years, so this will be the third time performing for Burlington Civic Music. It's always such a warm and enthusiastic crowd. We're excited to see so

many familiar faces and meet new ones as well."

McDonough gave a nod to BCM program director Barbara McRoberts: "Barbara has been a fantastic

advocate for the arts in this community and a loyal supporter of my music and my shows. I've been thrilled to

**SEE MCDONOUGH, PAGE 8**

# MCDONOUGH: He concludes two-hour concert with medley of carols

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

work with her.”

## PIANO MAN

This was McDonough's 21st year on the road presenting musical shows with his blazing keyboard work.

McDonough was born in Monticello, Iowa and began piano lessons when he was seven years old. His talent and love of music eventually propelled him into a career as a professional musician.

But the road to success wasn't without its detours: his musical career nearly ended in the eighth grade, when he crushed his right hand in an accident. Two hours of surgery left him with pins in his fingers and tiny fractures across his hand. But he kept playing – with a cast on his right hand – throughout rehabilitation, and a year later, he bought a Steinway grand piano to celebrate how far he'd come.

Today McDonough's right hand arpeggio work is a work of art.

After graduating from Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa with a degree in music education, McDonough left the world of performance for a job as an air traffic controller at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago.

But true musician that he is, two years later McDonough returned his first and true love, and in the summer of 2000, he was offered a job performing on the largest cruise ship in the world.

Now in his 21st year of touring, McDonough is flying high and sailing free.

## THE CONCERT

The orchestra began with “Ring Silver Bells” with the curtain down, then McDonough spoke briefly before stepping into “It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas” and on into “There's No Place Like Home for the Holidays,” after which he introduced his musicians to cheers.

“There's no music in the world like Christmas music,” McDonough said. “Imagine you're at my place. There's nothing I'd rather do than sit at the piano and play Christmas songs for you,” he said before launching “Silver Bells” sprinkled



**Pianist Jim McDonough performs “Christmas with Jim McDonough and His Orchestra” on Saturday night at Burlington Memorial Auditorium. The show, brought by Burlington Civic Music Association, featured McDonough and his 16-piece band. This was McDonough's third appearance in Burlington in his 21-year career. (Bob Saar/For The Hawk Eye)**

with some slightly Latin chord flourishing.

McDonough wore a black bow tie, red pocket bandanna and silver sequined jacket in the first half of the show, trading that for a red blazer in the second.

He flourished his way through a few piano-only songs including “Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire” and “White Christmas” and “Sleigh Ride.”

Each musician's podium bore a huge snowflake, and they performed before a backdrop of layered satin draperies fronted with large golden lighted wreaths, topped off with a Christmas tree in each corner.

McDonough got the crowd clapping along on a swinging, peppy version of “Jingle Bells” that leaped into “Deck the Halls” and on to “O Tannenbaum.”

Pretty much everything McDonough played segued into yet another Christmas song.

Cedar Rapids soundman Darin

Ulmer has been with McDonough 18 years.

“He's a fantastic musician, and that enables us to focus on how to best enhance what he's doing on the stage, because he's got his part — so now we have to translate that to the audience,” Ulmer said. “This is a family. We work well together, we know one another.”

Ulmer, guided by BMA director Mike O'Neil, mixed some of the smoothest audio the Auditorium has heard.

## THE MEDLEY MELEE

Civic Music patrons were hoping McDonough would repeat his impromptu Christmas medley of dozens of songs — not assembled in advance; rather, McDonough took suggestions from the crowd as to what songs he could include in his medley.

They weren't all Christmas songs.

The audience yelled out “Piano Man” and “Great Balls of Fire” and the theme from Hill Street Blues. Hey, why not?

Toss in “Brick House” and “Cotton-Eyed Joe” and McDonough suggested that maybe not every tune would make it onto his sheet of paper, addressing the men in the audience when he said, “I had my annual physical and the doctor told me I have selective hearing.”

Conductor Corey Smith just rested his baton and smiled. Smith was a musician in the orchestra for many years.

McDonough then hammered out the medley, sneaking in the “Peanuts” theme, “Fly Me to the Moon,” “All I Want for Christmas is My Two Front Teeth” and wrapping it all up with “Rhapsody in Blue.”

## BUMBLE BEE KEYBOARD

McDonough whipped out the 1946 version of “Flight of the Bumble Bee” called “Bumble Boogie” by Jack Fina from the movie “It's Great to Be Young,” which required McDonough to play more notes per second than anyone could count.

His right hand was on fire from speeding up and down the keyboard.

It went on like that into the night, McDonough churning out rich chording with the band behind him, song after song, all of it upbeat

and happy — the way it should be at Christmastime.

McDonough sang a few songs as well, some while standing, most as he exhibited his fabulous piano skills.

We could say McDonough was gifted and the crowd rapt, but we won't.

On it went: “Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy” followed by a medley of religious classics.

“McDonough's Christmas concert stunned our audience with its perfection,” McRoberts said later. “No surprise, because the excellence of his piano artistry is an Iowa treasure. The stage setting was gorgeous and we had a wonderfully appreciative audience.”

## FINALLY, FINALE

McDonough concluded his two-hour Christmas cheer with a medley of carols that “capture the magic of that night,” he said.

“There's something magical about the Magi,” McDonough quipped.

He began his final onslaught with “Claire de Lune” into “Silent Night” into “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear.”

The man was unstoppable.

On into “O, Holy Night” and still no orchestra, until the last number: A superb new arrangement of “Ring Silver Bells” as the bandstands and spotlights flashed in time with the music.

Oh, and consider this: McDonough used no sheet music.

“My hope for this venue and our music series is that more people take advantage of the opportunity to experience such performances,” McRoberts concluded.

## MORE MCDONOUGH

Jim McDonough Productions, Inc., distributes McDonough's albums and schedule through his Web site, PianoFavorites.com.

You can watch McDonough's Christmas medley on Facebook at jimcdonoughmusic/videos but be forewarned: the video is 40 minutes long.

Next up for Civic Music: The Sofia Philharmonic Orchestra, the national orchestra of Bulgaria, on Saturday, February 24.