Robert Spano

"Robert Spano has that great skill in a conductor of making every performance radiate joy. You would think, each time, that he has been waiting all his life to make this music happen, and that he is darned well going to make it happen to the utmost." —*New York Times*

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Robert Spano, conductor
2023-2024 Full Biography

Robert Spano, conductor, pianist, composer, and teacher, is known worldwide for the intensity of his artistry and distinctive communicative abilities, creating a sense of inclusion and warmth among musicians and audiences that is unique among American orchestras. After twenty seasons as Music Director, he continues his association with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra as Music Director Laureate. An avid mentor to rising artists, he is responsible for nurturing the careers of numerous celebrated composers, conductors, and performers. As Music Director of the Aspen Music Festival and School since 2011, he oversees the programming of more than 300 events and educational programs for 630 students and young performers. Principal Guest Conductor of the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra since 2019, Spano began his tenure as Music Director in August 2022, and will continue there through the 2027-2028 season. He is the tenth Music Director in the orchestra's history, which was founded in 1912. In January 2024, Spano was appointed Principal Conductor of the Rhode Island Philharmonic Orchestra & Music School. In February 2024, Spano was appointed Music Director of the Washington National Opera, beginning in the 2025–2026 season, for a three-year term; he is currently the WNO's Music Director Designate.

During the 2023-2024 season, Spano leads the Fort Worth Symphony symphonic and chamber music programs, as well as a gala concert with Renée Fleming and Rod Gilfry, in addition to overseeing the orchestra and music staff and shaping the artistic direction of the orchestra and driving its continued growth. Additional engagements this season include the Atlanta and New Jersey Symphonies, Denver, Naples, and Rhode Island Philharmonics, multiple weeks at Curtis and Rice University, and a recital in Napa with Kelley O'Connor.

Maestro Spano made his highly-acclaimed Metropolitan Opera debut in 2019, leading the US premiere of *Marnie*, the second opera by American composer Nico Muhly. Recent concert highlights have included several world premiere performances, including *Voy a Dormir* by Bryce Dessner at Carnegie Hall with the Orchestra of St. Luke's and mezzo-soprano Kelley O'Connor; George Tsontakis's Violin Concerto No. 3 with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra; Dimitrios Skyllas's *Kyrie eleison* with the BBC Symphony Orchestra; the Tuba Concerto by Jennifer Higdon, performed by Craig Knox and the Pittsburgh Symphony; *Melodia, For Piano and Orchestra*, by Canadian composer Matthew Ricketts at the Aspen Music Festival; and *Miserere*, by ASO bassist Michael Kurth.

Spano recently returned to his early love of composing. His newest work is a song cycle on Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* that he wrote for mezzo-soprano Kelley O'Connor. In 2016, he premiered

his *Sonata: Four Elements* for piano at the Aspen Music Festival, and a song cycle, *Hölderlin-Lieder,* for soprano Jessica Rivera.

The Atlanta School of Composers reflects Spano's commitment to American contemporary music. He has led ASO performances at Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, and the Ravinia, Ojai, and Savannah Music Festivals. Guest engagements have included the Cleveland, Philadelphia, and Minnesota Orchestras, New York and Los Angeles Philharmonics, and the San Francisco, Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Houston, New World, San Diego, Oregon, Utah, and Kansas City Symphonies. Internationally, Maestro Spano has led the Orchestra Filarmonica della Scala, BBC Symphony, Amsterdam's Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Orquestra Sinfonica Brasileira, Orquestra Sinfonica Estado Sao Paulo, Wroclaw Philharmonic, the Melbourne and Sydney Symphonies in Australia, and the Saito Kinen Orchestra in Japan. His opera performances include Covent Garden, Welsh National Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, Houston Grand Opera, and the 2005 and 2009 Seattle Opera productions of Wagner's *Ring* cycles.

With a discography of critically-acclaimed recordings for Telarc, Deutsche Grammophon, and ASO Media, Robert Spano has garnered four Grammy™ Awards and eight nominations with the Atlanta Symphony. Spano is on faculty at Oberlin Conservatory and has received honorary doctorates from Bowling Green State University, the Curtis Institute of Music, Emory University, and Oberlin. Maestro Spano is a recipient of the Georgia Governor's Award For The Arts And Humanities and is one of two classical musicians inducted into the Georgia Music Hall of Fame. He makes his home in Atlanta and Fort Worth.

"Mr. Spano drew a glowing, spacious performance of this Brahms masterwork from the orchestra, marking a great return visit for both him and this essential ensemble." – *The New York Times*

"The festival's music director, Robert Spano, caught both the broadest and finest strokes of tempo, dynamics and critical orchestral balances. He drew the best playing in the quiet, subtle moments of the score and long buildups to big climaxes." – *Aspen Times*

"The sonics of the CD are excellent, and the presence of both Rivera and Spano well-suited. It is a fine presentation of both Rivera's voice and Spano's collaborative capabilities at the piano, as well as his insight into his skills as a composer." - *ArtsATL*

FEBRUARY 2024 -- AT THE REQUEST OF THE ARTIST, PLEASE DO NOT ALTER THIS BIOGRAPHY WITHOUT APPROVAL

OPERA NEWS

January 27, 2023

Werther

HOUSTON
Houston Grand Opera
By Gregory Barnett

IT SHOULD BE HARD TO MAKE the poet Werther a relevant character in the twenty-first century. In 2023, we would recommend therapy or antidepressants, possibly even psychiatric care, for what we would likely identify, clinically, as emotional problems rather than artistic temperament. And in the modern era, we tend to see a man who obsesses compulsively over a woman as a danger to her. Yet in its new production of Massenet's opera (seen Jan. 27), Houston Grand Opera allowed its audience to feel complete empathy for Werther's tragic story with soaring and then melting vocal lines, rich, impassioned orchestral interludes and a last-act coup de théâtre of set design.

It would be hard to imagine a better Werther than the supercharged, dreamy-to-febrile characterization that tenor Matthew Polenzani offered in his HGO debut. However, it was the quality of Polenzani's consistently sweet, legato singing, passionately strong in "Pourquoi me réveiller," or feebly dying away in "No ... Charlotte ... je meurs," that made him a distinguished interpreter of the role.

Isabel Leonard, also making her HGO debut, made Charlotte's strength of character and her struggle with her feelings for Werther clear and audible. Leonard's mezzo-soprano has an apt core of strength throughout her range, ideal for the conscience-stricken Charlotte. As Charlotte's younger sister, Sophie, American soprano Jasmine Habersham (another HGO debut) deployed her light, flexible soprano to establish the youthful character of a teenager, but altered her sound to suggest sustained intensity as Sophie is drawn into Werther and Charlotte's conflict. American baritone Sean Michael Plumb made his HGO debut in this *Werther* as Charlotte's husband, Albert, singing with a smoothly attractive voice. This lyric quality suited the "nice-guy" Albert that we see for most of the opera, but perhaps diminished the edge required when Albert confronts Charlotte over Werther's visit in Act III and then insists that she send his pistols to Werther, in spite of the obvious danger of doing so.

Patrick Carfizzi, with an always satisfying bass-baritone sound as the Bailiff, was a spirited and playful stage presence. As his six younger children, Benjamin Armstrong, Olivia Atanu, Elizabeth Garcia, Daniel Karash, Dante Petrozzi, and Peter Theurer supplied the innocently exuberant caroling that Massenet used to frame Werther's tragedy. Current Studio Artists Cory McGee (Johann), Ricardo Garcia (Schmidt), Luke Sutliff (Brühlmann), and Emily Treigle (Kätchen) provided the comic relief, whether in

Brühlmann and Kätchen's "Klopstock!" interjection, or Johann and Schmidt's drunken banter. McGee's bass was a standout for its projection and resonance.

HGO's new *Werther*, the company's first staging of the opera in forty years, was a joint production with the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, where it was first seen in 2004, and Opéra National de Paris. The production, by French director Benoît Jacquot, gives a disciplined nineteenth–century bourgeois formality to Werther and Charlotte's interactions until their Act III kiss. But it's rarely a good idea to have singers facing away from the audience, as Johann and Schmidt do at the beginning of Act II, and Charlotte's exclamation at Werther's return in Act III was diminished by his non-arrival for a few moments more (and from the opposite corner of the stage, toward which she wasn't looking). Charles Edwards's set design efficiently but vividly captured the four different places of the opera's four acts. The standout moment centered on his depiction of Werther's study, a three-sided onstage cube, with the remaining side open toward the audience. The interior and scale were reminiscent of a starving-artist's garret, but its distinguishing feature lay in how it moved slowly forward, almost imperceptibly, throughout the orchestral introduction to the last act. The effect was cinematic, as if the camera were steadily zooming in on the scene of the near-dead Werther.

Robert Spano conducted the performance, which achieved a perfect balance between stage and pit and featured moving performances of Massenet's orchestral interludes by the HGO Orchestra, the bardic signifier of Joan Eidman's fine harp playing during Werther's reading of Ossian's verses, and the exotic sound of Scott Plugge's saxophone playing during Charlotte's "Air des larmes."

Robert Spano

The Dallas Morning News

April 22, 2023

Fort Worth Symphony evokes fantasies and legends — with dancers

By Scott Cantrell

If you're up for a really imaginative, stimulating orchestra concert, repeats of the Fort Worth Symphony's Friday night concert are highly recommended.

The program, ranging from the Prelude to Engelbert Humperdinck's opera Hansel and Gretel to the world premiere of Brian Raphael Nabors' Of Earth and Sky: Tales from the Motherland, could have been titled "Fantasies and Legends." It was filled out with evocative works by Ravel and Charles Tomlinson Griffes, and Stravinsky's 1919 Firebird Suite was performed with 12 dancers from Texas Ballet Theater. With music director Robert Spano conducting, at Bass Performance Hall, the orchestra played throughout with skill and sophistication.

Nabors, an Alabama native in his early 30s, with a doctorate in composition from the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, draws on African myths in his 25-minute, four-movement suite. The middle movements weren't clearly differentiated — supertitles would have been helpful — but here's what I gleaned:

"Huveane Moves Away from the Humans" evokes divine creation, then withdrawal, in sonic bursts, chatters and fanfares. "Anansi" portrays a wily

teacher and trickster — a counterpart to the coyote of American Indian mythology — in brightly colored, elaborately layered dances.

"Nyami Nyami," a Tonga dragon god, is represented with explosions and flashes, then somber musings by violas. Finally, "Celebration" is a blowout of feisty dances, percussion driven, bristling with syncopations and busy counterpoints. This could also be excerpted as a flashy concert opener.

Spano and the orchestra gave a brilliant performance, prefaced by Nabors' personable video introduction, projected on a big screen over the stage.

Humperdinck's opera is based on the Grimm brothers' fairytale. Its prelude deftly mingles music noble, tender, happy and downright jolly. FWSO horns were in particularly fine form in their opening moments to shine.

Ravel's five-movement Mother Goose Suite draws on Charles Perrault's children's tales. Spano led the orchestra in a performance of diaphanous delicacies, with just enough sparkle at the right moments and a suavely calibrated final crescendo.

Charles Tomlinson Griffes, a pioneering American impressionist who lived from 1884 to 1920, was represented by his 1919 tone poem, The Pleasure Dome of Kubla Khan, inspired by Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem Kubla Khan. "Exotic" textures, melodies and harmonies rise to a climax of telling splendor before fading away.

With the orchestra playing the Stravinsky upstage from stand lights, evocatively costumed dancers, vividly choreographed by Tim O'Keefe, brought the Firebird action to life downstage. The sinister Kastchei (Carl Coomer) and his minions jerked and flung themselves about in red and black. In a brilliant red tutu, Nicole Von Enck's Firebird flitted and pirouetted as if lighter than air.

Andre Silva's Prince Ivan was very much the danseur noble, Rieko Hatato the gracious Princess Tsarevna, abetted by four princesses in pink.

Yet again, Spano had the orchestra vividly characterizing the music, from finely finished pianissimos to thrilling but carefully controlled explosions of brass. It was a concert to leave you full of wonder at both music and musicians — and this time at dancers, as well.

Robert Spano

SAN DIEGO STORY

May 6, 2023

Robert Spano Leads the San Diego Symphony in Compelling Lutosławski and Rachmaninoff

By Ken Herman

Robert Spano, who recently completed his lauded 20-year tenure as Music Director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, conducted the San Diego Symphony Friday at the Rady Shell. Spano's program balanced the familiar—Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto—with the less familiar, Witold Lutosławski's 1954 *Concerto for Orchestra* and Brian Raphael Nabors' recent commission from the Atlanta Symphony "Onward."

Although Lutosławski is one of eastern Europe's most highly regarded composers from the second half of the 20th century, the San Diego Symphony has paid him scant attention. In 2018, guest conductor Johannes Debut led the orchestra in a shorter Lutosławski work, his *Little Suite*, but otherwise the highly regarded Pole has been overlooked.

Like Bartók's well-known *Concerto for Orchestra*, Lutosławski's work presents a work of serious scope and depth, three movements that engage the entire orchestra in a rewarding virtuoso venture. The first movement opens with grand, pulsing themes marked by a throbbing drum beat that goads the full orchestra into powerful crescendos. Having gained his audience's full attention, the composer shifts to a stark, quiet section in which the woodwinds offer mysterious arabesques.

Anxious yet animated themes from high-pitched instruments scamper in the middle movement, "Capriccio notturno e arioso," while bolder themes from the orchestra's lowest instruments create tense anticipation in the fashion of a bold scherzo. Lutosławski clearly does not abandon tonality as many of his contemporaries in Western Europe did in this post-World War II era, but his use of folk music themes provides modal coloring that expands his harmonic palette. After the strings' pizzicato dance-like interlude, this movement ends abruptly with quiet drumming.

The heart of this *Concerto for Orchestra* is its lengthy final movement, "Passacaglia, toccata e corale." In traditional passacaglia style, the contrabass section introduces the bass theme, a sturdy pizzicato motif, upon which the passacaglia will unfold. Other low-pitched instruments crowd the scene until the English Horn announces a vigorous countersubject, played with her customary authority by Andrea Overturf. When the full string section climbs on board, they give this new subject brazen, martial overtones, which the percussion section amplifies as the passacaglia comes to a majestic climax. In the toccata section, vibrant strings and spirited brass fanfares compete as fragments of the majestic final chorale enter this powerful, driving finale.

Spanos proved a most trustworthy guide for the orchestra in this adventurous

score, and he secured from the players a consistently confident—even polished—account of this major work.

Not surprisingly, Sergei Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3 in D Minor, has not been neglected by the San Diego Symphony. In recent years pianists Kirill Gerstein and Behzod Abduraimov have given their accounts of this concerto with the orchestra, so it was about time for the American virtuoso Garrick Ohlsson to weigh in on this popular chestnut from the great Russian Romantic school of concertos.

Spano's tempo choice for the opening movement, an *allegro* with just the proper amount of urgency, served well the movement and its main theme, which plays an important role throughout the concerto. I expected Ohlsson's confident traversal of the composer's unrelenting and demanding flamboyant cascades, but I was impressed with the elegant cantabile tone he coaxed from the orchestra's Steinway throughout the lengthy concerto. Rachmaninoff wrote this concerto for himself to play on his 1909-1910 concert tour of the United States, and he gave himself ample opportunity to reveal the extent of both his musical invention and his vaunted keyboard technique.

Principal Oboe Sarah Skuster gave an enchanting account of the solo that opens the wistful *Adagio* movement, and once the piano finally appeared after an unusually extended introduction, Ohlsson caressed Rachmaninoff's ardent piano theme that so completely captures his lush, late-Romantic idiom.

Spano urged both orchestra and soloist to indulge fully the grandeur of the *Finale* as it builds its martial theme and recalls golden moments from earlier sections of the concerto. It would be difficult to imagine a more compelling account of this sumptuous, powerful concerto.

Nabors' compact but engaging "Onward" offered nattering fanfares poised in static orchestral suspension. Valiant horn calls and swift orchestral glissandos gave this 10-minute piece the excitement of an action movie sound track.

Robert Spano

ARTS ATL

June 7, 2023

Q&A: Robert Spano reflects on his ASO tenure and new job in Fort Worth

By James L. Paulk

Robert Spano, who led the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra through an extraordinary 22-year tenure before stepping down a year ago, made his Spoleto Festival USA debut May 26 in Charleston as part of a unique event that celebrated Geoff Nuttall, who died last fall.

Nuttall led the fabled Spoleto chamber music program for the past decade, infusing it with his infectious energy, wit and talent. "Virtuosic debauchery" was the term favored by his friends that best described his work here. As first violin in the St. Lawrence Quartet, he was internationally respected as an artist, but his connection to Charleston and Spoleto was intense.

The featured event of the festival's opening weekend, the concert included an array of guest artists and ensembles, including Anthony Roth Costanzo, Paul Groves and James Austin Smith, among many others. In a style that echoed Nuttall's chamber concerts, each piece was introduced by a presenter who reminisced about Nuttall.

Spano led the Spoleto Festival Orchestra in the first movement of Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1, with Stephen Prutsman as the spirited soloist. Spano and the strings were then joined by cellist Alisa Weilerstein for a gut-wrenching rendition of Fauré's mournful, *Élégie,* a work which seemed especially appropriate both for the dedication to Nuttall and for Memorial Day weekend.

The orchestra then retreated, and the balance of the program consisted of chamber and vocal works.

ArtsATL spoke with Spano on the day prior to the concert. (Full disclosure: The author, a longtime classical music writer, is senior annual giving officer for the ASO.)

ArtsATL: *Tell us about your connection to Geoff Nuttall.*

Robert Spano: Geoff was an amazing musician, but also an amazing human being. Tremendous energy; tremendous passion; great collaborator. We shared a passion for some of the same composers. This event is a testament to his life's work — that all these people are coming together to celebrate that. It makes us happy to see each other. Even in death, he is bringing us together: people I haven't seen in years. That's sort of the point: to remember that beautiful part.

ArtsATL: *You led the ASO for 22 years, including some difficult times, helping it to emerge from debts and lockouts; restoring the complement; surviving the pandemic without laying off musicians; and building a harmonious relationship with the musicians and the administration. Your leadership and collaborative approach were major factors in all of that, but you also refined the orchestra's sound, and the chorus has remained very strong. Of course, you're not entirely gone . . . you'll be back to lead concerts next spring. What are your hopes for the ASO as it builds on your legacy?*

Spano: I've been trying very hard to be a good ex-music director, to keep my nose out and steer clear. Of course, I talk to people and I hear things. I still love the orchestra very much. I can't wait to be back. I'm also gratified when I hear that great things are happening, like the *St. Matthew Passion* — I hear it was absolutely wonderful. If I were still to have a vision for the orchestra, it would be that it continues to thrive — it's truly a great artistic institution. And I think one of the unique things about Atlanta in *the* world of music is the ASO Chorus. The chorus and orchestra together are something unique in the world.

ArtsATL: *You're now completing your first year as music director at the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra. You're programming new music, including Jennifer Higdon, while showing deference to Fort Worth's unique heritage by inviting the winner of the Van Cliburn competition to perform with the orchestra. You've been getting great reviews: Scott Cantrell (longtime critic at the* Dallas Morning News*) has noted that you've been finding "new versatility and subtlety" in the orchestra's sound and suggesting that you and the orchestra have "a great future ahead." What does that future look like to you, and how is your approach different from that in Atlanta?*

Spano: I do try to be sensitive to the fact that some things are transferable, others are site-specific. Even though we have Jennifer Higdon in the last concert, who is such a fundamental part of the Atlanta School of Composers, she has her own place in Fort Worth, predating me. I was quite determined, as we work with living composers, that we not repeat, or try to repeat. Because the way things evolved was organic — it certainly wasn't mechanical. It was a matter of creating these relationships with composers, and a similar process will be necessary in Fort Worth.

Fortunately, my executive director in Fort Worth is very passionate about living composers, so he and I are taking a lot of care about who we're inviting and what we're inviting them to do, in a

similar way to how we did it in Atlanta, but unique to our situation.

The amazing thing about the Covid period in Fort Worth is that we were continuing to have auditions: I've already hired 13 musicians, some in key positions, because we were holding auditions all through that time, which was very rare. We still have some positions to fill. We're on a growth trajectory for the size of the orchestra. We're currently adding one new position a year for three years, and we'll see what happens after that.

We're also looking to expand the classical part of our season, and we're looking for new venues to do that in because we do not own our home in Bass Hall. We're a tenant of that performing arts organization. So, for us to expand the calendar, we have to find new venues in the area to present in. The exciting thing is that new venues have been built in the past few years. There are a lot of things going on about the growth of the orchestra, and even the personnel of the orchestra. It's exciting — it's a moment where the institution seems ready for this growth spurt.

ArtsATL: *When you arrived as music director at the Aspen Music Festival and School, you talked about your passion for living American composers, and how "engagement with new music vivifies our experience of older music." You said you were focused on "bringing music itself into the future." In Atlanta you created the Atlanta School of Composers, and when you return next spring you'll be conducting world premieres of works by Adam Schoenberg and Jonathan Leshnoff. How do you see the Atlanta School evolving now?*

Spano: It's not up to me, but I hope it does evolve, and I'm sure it will. The Leshnoff and Schoenberg pieces were commissions that were Covid cancellations. I was always careful not to define the Atlanta School too carefully. People would ask "who is in it?" and I would say, "Well, I can tell you at least four or five of them." But it's more of a fluid idea than a fixed identity. That's why it was such a valuable thing to do, and I hope it continues to evolve.

ArtsATL: *Last week in the* New York Times*, Maureen Dowd wrote about the feeling that classical music is enjoying a renaissance. Are you still optimistic about music's future?*

Spano: I know there's a lot of pessimistic talk. I also know that's been around since I was a kid. Sixty years later, we're still going! I have trouble believing the pessimistic reports. Because I'm at Aspen every summer, I see this whole new generation of people with immense talent, intelligence and passion for music. And every summer, my fellow faculty members and I say, "Are we making this up, or are they better?" And we keep deciding they're really better every year.

The pessimists look at classical attendance from a traditional lens in terms of the numbers, but without context as to who's going where for what. I remember a few years ago, (ASO executive director) Jennifer Barlament had some interesting statistics on how theater, dance and other forms of entertainment were seeing more attrition than classical music.

I think it will settle itself given the talent and the intelligence of the young people who are so committed to music in the world. And maybe it was ever thus. We all tend to think of what we have as having been there for a very long time. Well, orchestras have existed in the form that we experience for less than a century.

So how it's structured, how it's presented, and when — that might change. But I have a lot of trust.

I can't think of a time in history when there wasn't great music going on. In some of the worst situations, some of the most deplorable situations, great music was still thriving. I need only think of Shostakovich's *Leningrad Symphony,* Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*, and Haydn's *Mass in Time of War*. You know there's never been a time without great music. I have a lot of faith in that.

EarRelevant™

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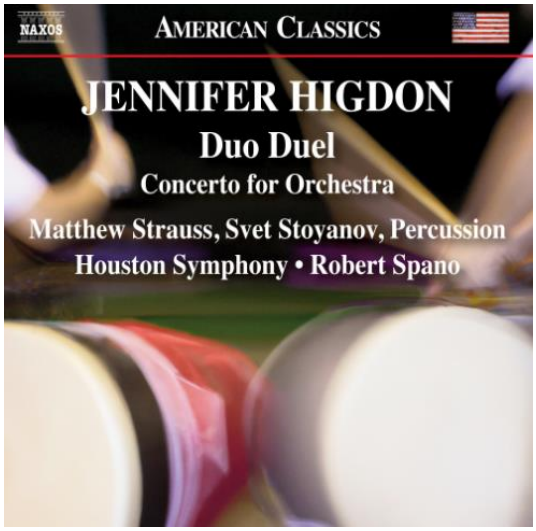
July 31, 2023

Robert Spano and Houston Symphony capture the rhythmic brilliance of Jennifer Higdon's music in new CD

By Giorgio Koukl



When characterizing the compositional style of **Jennifer Higdon**, one word immediately comes to mind: rhythm.

Higdon has many outstanding characteristics: exceptional bravura of orchestration and great inventiveness of colors. But her best quality ever is her capacity to build sound constructs of energy and speed which are breathtaking.

On this Naxos American Classics CD, we can listen to a first-time recording of *Duo Duel* (2020) for two percussionists and orchestra and a *Concerto for Orchestra* (2002).

Both works are directed with great precision and sense of dynamics by the conductor **Robert Spano** and played by the spectacular **Houston Symphony Orchestra**.

Since, as said, the rhythm is of particular interest for Ms. Higdon, it is only logical that she gives much attention to the percussion.

Duo Duel, with its nearly 24 minutes in a single movement, starts with some noninvasive sounds, slightly recalling a Christmas atmosphere. Nothing warns the listener about what is coming next. While the orchestra slowly steps in, an absolute orgy of contrasting rhythmical cells, micro themes, so to say, builds up. The orchestral interludes have their generous space to let the two brave percussionists, **Matthew Strauss** and **Svet Stoyanov**, breathe and regain energy.

Towards the end, there is one last cadenza, where the percussionists are playing one *against* the other, the speed obtained is something rarely heard before. In the big finale, the layers of different orchestral sections become so thick that even the skilled listener has difficulty digesting it all.

Higdon uses the percussion in a rather traditional way, rarely using special playing techniques, except for using a string instrument bow to play the vibraphone. Still, even with this self-imposed limitation, we get a score that is

never boring and successfully obtains an ever-changing carpet of colors.

Using *Concerto for Orchestra* as a title immediately recalls some precedent works with the same name. To cite the two most famous: Bartok and Lutoslawski.

Being divided into five sections, where the fourth and the fifth are “attacca,” once again, most of Higdon’s music is loaded with adrenaline. The slow sections are rare; if present, they are underlined with some sort of pulsation that voluntarily disturbs the quiet.

Here Robert Spano delivers a real firework of precisely crafted passages without any uncertainty, a true wonder of a symbiosis of a conductor and his orchestra.

Ms. Higdon uses a quite traditional orchestration, never using “exotic” instruments and avoiding even instruments like piano or harpsichord, which are pretty common.

When listening to Bartok and Lutoslawski, it seems that their common goal is to create a sense of “before” and “after” where themes are returning, well-spaced with calmer sections, building a well-planned sound surface, giving the listener time to adjust and enjoy.

The approach of Ms. Higdon is a very different one.

Her music, similar to a lava stream, proceeds forwards without caring much about what happened before, and if sometimes a theme returns, it is mostly transformed beyond recognition. Good examples are the fourth and fifth sections of the orchestra concerto.

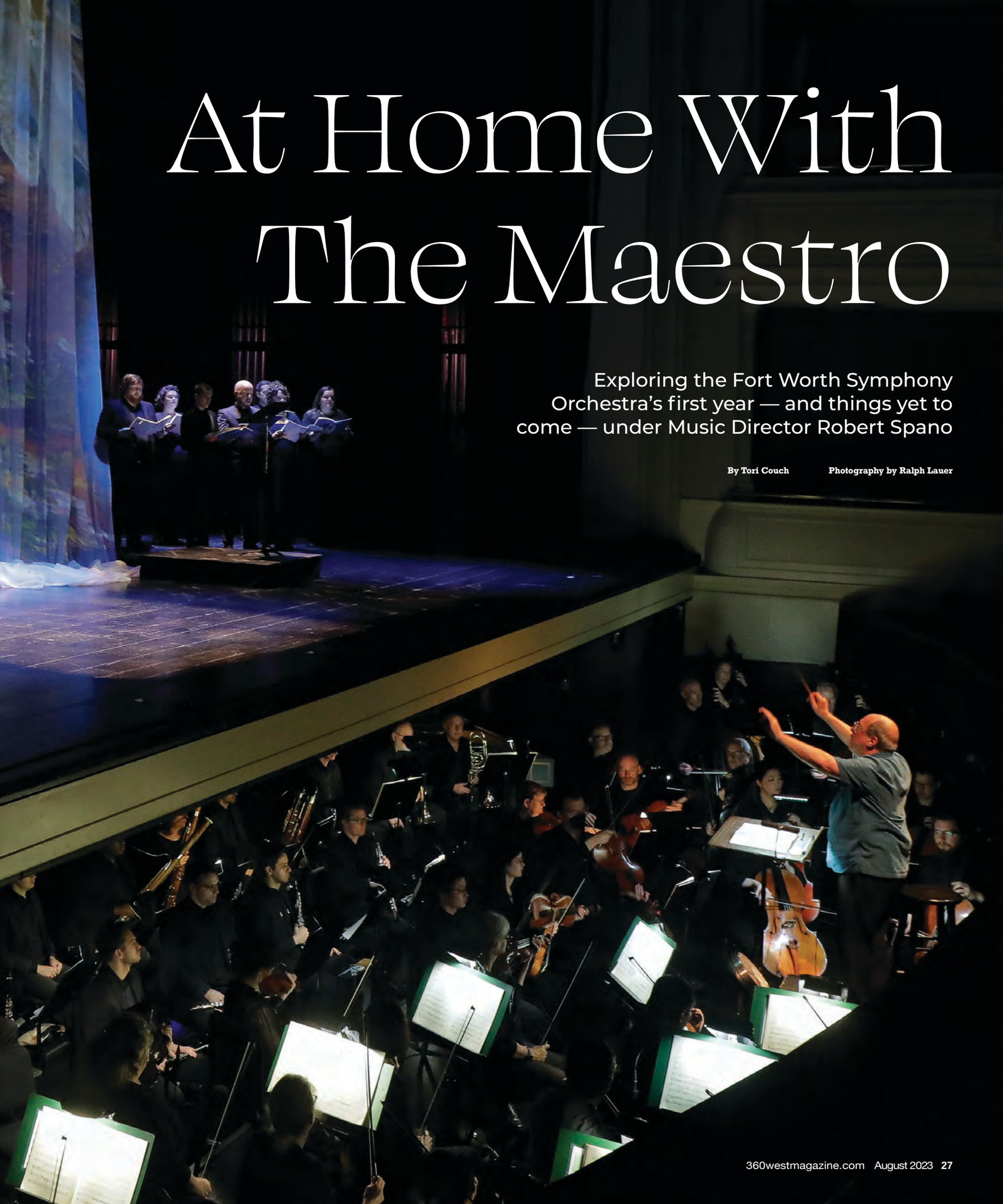
As she explains in the booklet, the speed is constantly augmented throughout the duration, reaching a difficult-to-beat climax.

This disc is a clear recommendation to anybody who admires the music of our century but prefers to avoid venturing into too-experimental fields.

At Home With The Maestro

Exploring the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra's first year — and things yet to come — under Music Director Robert Spano

By Tori Couch Photography by Ralph Lauer



Robert Spano's personal library could make an English, religion or philosophy professor blush.

The books Spano "loves to look at" greet him as he walks in the door of his condo at the Texas & Pacific Lofts in downtown Fort Worth.

They include multivolume collections, such as the "Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians" and the 13-volume, original edition of James George Frazer's "The Golden Bough."

The living room wall houses fiction, biographies, plays, scripts, literary criticisms, essays and poetry. In the office, works on psychology and Christian theology fill several shelves. Philosophers and thinkers highlight another wall, and the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra music director arranges them in a specific way.

"I put them in alphabetical order, and I know they're going to hate being next to each other because they're all gonna argue," Spano said. "And I think they should."

Finally, over in world religions, Spano's selections cover ancient Greek beliefs, Taoism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Islam, Judaism and Jewish mysticism.

The books arrived in 140 boxes and are just a portion of Spano's entire library, which had gone into storage for three years. What's more impressive is the self-described biblioholic's sense of recall: He described the collection from memory while sitting in the lofts' resident lounge on a morning in late May.

"I'm sorry I wouldn't let you in the house," he said. "I'm still moving basically. It's been a year, but I'm still moving. I've still got boxes all over the place."

Considering Maestro Spano served as a guest conductor around the country over the past nine months and then hopped on an airplane days after this conversation to direct the Aspen Music Festival and School summer programming, it's understandable that boxes remain unpacked.

The annual trip to Aspen, where Spano has been music director since 2011, capped his inaugural season as the symphony's music director in Fort Worth.

Robert Spano has lived in Fort Worth's Texas & Pacific Lofts since last fall and has discovered downtown favorites like the Fort Worth Water Gardens.

During that 2022-23 season, Spano and symphony CEO and President Keith Cerny reimagined performances based on a vision called Theater of a Concert. This brought new experiences to Bass Performance Hall, including a collaborative performance of Stravinsky's "The Firebird" with Texas Ballet Theater and an interactive staging of the oratorio "Haydn: The Creation."

More collaborative performances and the third year of the Chamber Series at the Kimbell Art Museum are scheduled for the 2023-24 season.

Spano first connected with the symphony in March 2019, as it sought a successor for music director Miguel Harth-Bedoya. Mercedes Bass, chair of the symphony board, asked Spano to serve as principal guest conductor, and he accepted. Bass and Spano had met through Aspen, where she is a trustee of The Aspen Institute and serves on the festival's school advisory board.

Spano — who spent the previous 20 years leading the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra — has ushered in quite a few changes in Fort Worth. So many, in fact, that Cara Owens, assistant principal bassoonist, said the symphony has entered "a brave new world."

ADAPTING AMID A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

Owens and Michael Shih, concertmaster/violinist, have both been in the orchestra for over 20 years, playing under Harth-Bedoya and numerous guest conductors.

"Robert has this wonderful, warm style that he invites all of us in," Shih said. "When we rehearse, you really feel like you are part of this vision that he's trying to create."

Owens also used the word "inviting" when describing Spano's rehearsals. The organization and vision for each rehearsal is its own art form, she said.

"There's no rehearsing in such a manner you get to the end of the two-and-a-half hours and you feel like there's still so much more to do," she said. "He covered everything he clearly wanted to cover."

Spano began his tenure as music director in August 2022 after starting as music director designate in April 2021. He initially signed a three-year contract and recently agreed to an extension through the 2027-28 season.

Spano hit the ground running by hiring almost a dozen tenure-track musicians. These vacant positions could not be filled while the symphony was between music directors.

Even though Spano had interacted with the orchestra before, as the new music director he wanted a better understanding of the group's immediate needs, wants and goals. So he held eight lunch meetings with eight musicians at a time until he met everyone.

"Maybe one of the best things that came out of that process for me is how committed they are to this orchestra, to themselves and to each other," Spano said. "How important it is to them and how invested they are in the enterprise. That's not true everywhere. There's a real spirit in the orchestra."

Spano saw that spirit on full display while guest conducting at a symphony performance in January 2021 amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

It was his first live performance since COVID forced shutdowns across the country in March 2020 and paused live in-person performances.

Cerny and the symphony worked tirelessly to bring back safe, live performances. The organization even kept staff members and musicians on the payroll, said Cerny, who joined the symphony in 2019 and was deep into the music director search when the pandemic hit.

The 2020-21 season started in September 2020 at Will Rogers Memorial Auditorium, since Bass Performance Hall did not reopen in time.

"When we rehearse, you really feel like you are part of this vision that he's trying to create."

— Michael Shih, FWSO Concertmaster

Robert Spano started as music director of the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra in August 2022. Since then, he has worked with president and CEO Keith Cerny to reimagine the symphony experience under a concept called Theater of a Concert.

"We were one of the first orchestras in the country to [perform live]," Cerny said. "We're really proud of that."

COVID performances looked very different from the pre-pandemic days. Instead of musicians forming a tight semicircle around the conductor, they were spread out in a straight line, with 6 feet between each musician and plexiglass separating each row. Musicians had monitors near them, so they could hear other instruments and try to play together. Conductors needed a microphone to address the entire orchestra.

The music might not have been perfect, but the performances provided everyone involved a taste of community and an escape from isolation.

More than two years later, Spano's eyes light up behind his black-rimmed glasses while recalling the January 2021 performance in Fort Worth.

"It was so inspiring to be at Will Rogers during that period," Spano said. "It was a lifesaver."

Mollie Lasater, a symphony board member since 1986, remembers the performance well. There was no intermission or planned break, but at one point, Spano paused and turned to the audience.

"He said, 'I just have to take a moment to tell you that this is a wonderful orchestra and this is the first time I've been able to conduct live in a whole year,'" Lasater said. "It just brought the house down."

Another boon to the symphony's pandemic years was the $8.1 million in government assistance it received, including from the Paycheck Protection Program.

But with that aid ending, Cerny is looking ahead.

He has prioritized expanding the board, bringing in more audience members and finding more fundraising avenues. A tentative budget projection for 2023-24 is more than $15.5 million, Cerny said. The budget in 2022-23 was $15.1 million.

"Three years in COVID, we were able to have essentially balanced budgets, so that was great," Cerny said. "This year, we're raising money as fast as we can."

Cerny negotiated a new three-year contract with the musicians last year. He is also committed to gradually increasing the orchestra's physical size. The symphony hopes to add one new core orchestra member per year during the first three years of Spano's tenure, Cerny said. Currently, the orchestra has 68 core members.

With Spano on board, the symphony's artistic vision is changing, too.

Spano was already thinking about taking the music director position around the time of the January performance, although it didn't fit his initial post-Atlanta plans. He had wanted more freedom in his schedule and

an opportunity to do things differently. But a new path formed when Bass presented Spano with the idea of being the symphony's next music director over dinner in late 2020. The symphony announced Spano would become its 10th music director in February 2021.

"I got excited about the idea and realized I could change my plans for what was coming next in my life," Spano said. "It's been a wonderful thing already."

THEATER OF A CONCERT

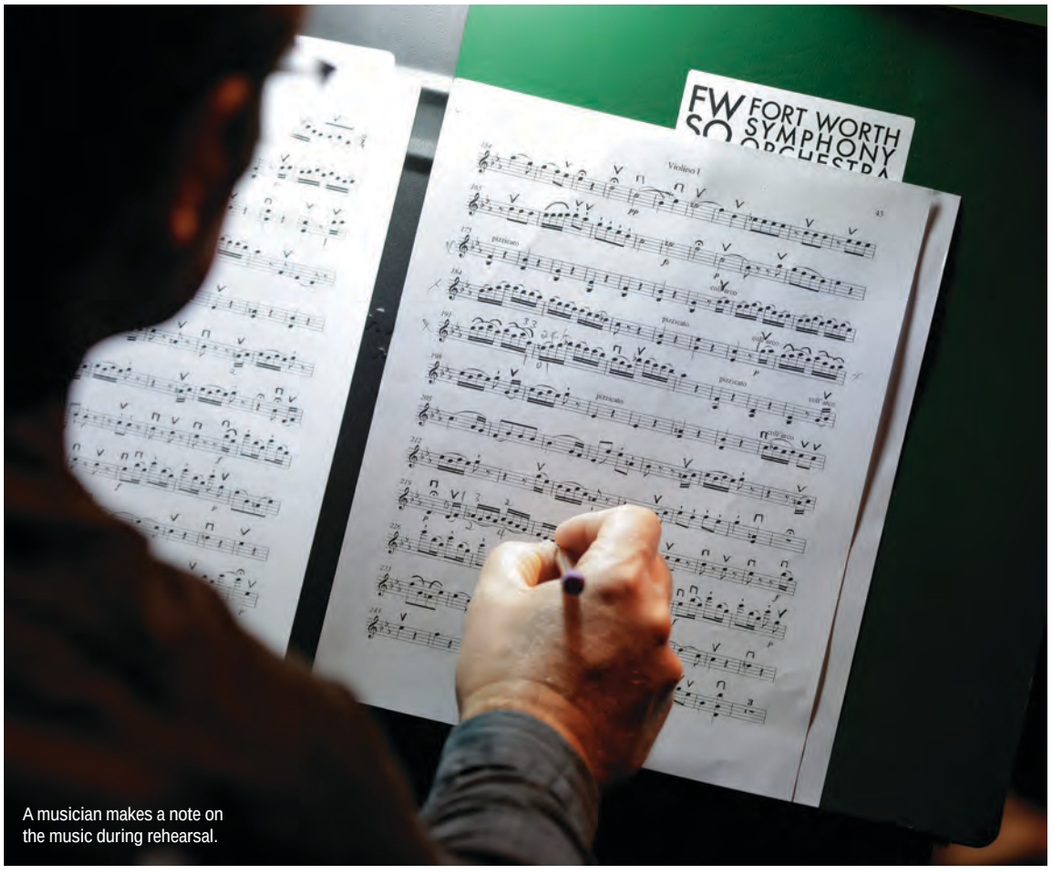
As Tim O'Keefe watched Texas Ballet Theater perform the 1919 version of Stravinsky's Suite from "The Firebird" on the Bass Performance Hall stage in April with the symphony, the ballet's acting artistic director could only imagine what the dancers were experiencing.

"I was so happy for the dancers, because they had that wall of music behind them," O'Keefe, a former dancer, said. "It must have been so fantastic."

O'Keefe choreographed the 22-minute dance for the symphony's "A Night at the Ballet" show, which included visiting composer Brian Raphael Nabors and music from Humperdinck, Griffes and Ravel.

The large-scale collaboration stemmed from Cerny and Spano's Theater of a Concert vision.

"A concert is inherently theater," Spano said. "Then the notion is how do we enhance the theatricality of the experience. What things



A musician makes a note on the music during rehearsal.

Aspen Music Festival and School music director Robert Spano (right) works with Aspen Conducting Academy (ACA) fellow Yuwon Kim at an ACA Orchestra rehearsal. In 2018, Kim earned top honors in Norway's 2018 Princess Astrid International Music Competition. As of 2022, Kim is the Rita E. Hauser Conducting Fellow at Curtis Institute of Music.

Photo by Alex Irvin and courtesy of the Aspen Music Festival and School

contribute to the enjoyment of the audience and of the performers as well. How do we make the most of that reality?"

The Theater of a Concert concept covers a wide range of additional elements and even minor enhancements, Spano said, like interviewing a composer onstage.

The "Firebird" performance was part of a three-year Stravinsky ballet series that continues into 2023-24 with Dallas Black Dance Theatre performing "Petrushka." Cerny is in talks with a third ballet company for the 2024-25 season and had nearly 80 percent of that season planned in May.

Spano and Cerny both have experience with collaborations and find that they stretch the audience's frame of reference around a particular piece of music, Cerny said.

"I've said ["Firebird" is] truly one of the most exciting projects I've produced in my career," he said. "People say, 'Why?' It brought all these elements together that you don't normally see."

Each collaborative project requires detailed, long-term planning.

About 18 months before "A Night at the Ballet" became a reality, Cerny and Spano approached O'Keefe. He jumped at the opportunity and spent countless hours on Zoom calls with symphony staff, working out performance logistics.

Figuring out how 12 dancers and the full orchestra would share the stage took strategic thinking. Limited stage space forced unique prop placement, such as hanging from the ceiling the egg where the antagonist Koschei puts his soul.

O'Keefe started rehearsals about three-and-a-half weeks before the performance. Because Spano's schedule prevented him from attending rehearsals until production week, O'Keefe sent videos so Spano could offer feedback. Cerny attended some rehearsals and provided additional guidance.

During that time, O'Keefe noticed the version of "Firebird" that Spano picked went a little fast for the dancers. Spano happily accommodated O'Keefe's tempo adjustment request.

"He was such a pleasure to work with, but you could tell he was just as

Robert Spano conducts the orchestra during a rehearsal in the 2022-23 season. Spano has conducted orchestras and operas around the world and spent 20 years as music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra.

interested in our needs," O'Keefe said. "Where we were coming from and how we were expressing the music as opposed to how he would express the music and combining that together."

A month after the "A Night at the Ballet" performance, the symphony continued the Theater of a Concert concept. Seraphic Fire, a Miami-based vocal ensemble, and three vocal soloists helped present "Haydn: The Creation."

The orchestra stayed in the pit while singers moved around onstage and images relating to the lyrics were projected on screens and a draped sheet. A digital box above the stage translated the German oratorio into English.

Next season, a collaboration with the Calgary-based touring group Old Trout Puppet Workshop will bring Prokofiev's "Peter and the Wolf" to life with large puppets while the orchestra plays. The symphony will continue doing traditional symphonic performances but occasionally add elements. Collaborating remains a priority.

"Part of our mission is to be mindful that we have these multiple audiences that we want to take care of and appeal to and attract and invite," Spano said. "The variety is necessary if we're to do that."

The musicians enjoy engaging with other performing arts groups, too.

"The various forms of art don't exist in vacuums," Owens said. "Collaboration is what it's about. It just adds depth."

Each season also includes the Chamber Series at the Kimbell Art Museum, a program Spano and Cerny started during the 2021-22 season. It can highlight composers who might not drive ticket sales at Bass Performance Hall or spotlight music intended for smaller ensembles and a more intimate setting, Cerny said.

Spano has played the piano and performed some of his compositions through the Chamber Series. Principal musicians from the symphony have also participated and shared music with audiences of up to 250 people. In October, Cerny is performing Bartók's "Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion" with the symphony's pianist.

The Theater of a Concert vision will keep evolving over the next five seasons. Spano's music industry connections and depth of experience conducting orchestras, choirs, symphonies, operas and ballets constantly brings new ideas, Cerny said.

A joyful personality and a passion for music make the planning process more enjoyable, too.

"It's one of the absolute high points of my job, because he's such a great colleague," Cerny said. "Ultimately, he has final say on many things, but we go through this very intentional, really carefully thought-through process that is so rewarding and tied to the Theater of a Concert strategy."

Spano echoed those feelings when asked about working with Cerny.

"Keith and I were laughing the other night that we never should have been allowed to work together, because we egg each other on," Spano said. "We share a very similar passion around live performance, fascinations with what's possible and what we'd like to explore."

TURNING PASSIONS INTO A CAREER

Spano focuses on the symphony most of the year, but as June approaches, the Aspen Music Festival and School garners all the attention.

Spano has been involved with the festival in some capacity since 1993. He now directs the Aspen Conducting Academy, and oversees programming for more than 300 events and educational programs for 630 students and young performers.

Aspen is where board member Lasater first saw Spano in action. She and her husband have attended the festival for years and financially supported it for more than two decades.

Lasater and her husband, as well as her grandchildren, have watched young conductors from the school learn and grow on the spot.

"They're all dressed in their tuxedos and they might conduct one movement of a symphony,"

SPECIAL PROMOTION

POWER9® PEOPLE

An ongoing series about people improving their well-being

Fort Worth is the largest certified Blue Zones Community® in the country. Each month we talk to a different member of our community and find out how they experience well-being. This month's featured guest is **Reggie Robinson**, Executive Director at the ***FunkyTown Food Project***, which empowers Fort Worth's young people (and adults) to plant and harvest healthy food.

photo by Rodney Johnson

Q: FunkyTown Food Project hires youth during the summer for six-week Seed Crew opportunities. What do they do?

A: We work four days a week from nine until noon solarizing, turning beds, planting beds, harvesting, composting, weeding, watering – everything you need to do in a garden. In the afternoon we do workshops on leadership, community, purpose, and character. We're teaching them that giant walls are built by laying one brick at a time.

Q: What are you growing now?

A: Lettuce, peas, peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers, and herbs like garlic, parsley, and basil. We're planting pumpkins for the fall. One of my favorite features is the time we spend cooking every Friday. It's a chef's dream to have fresh veggies and herbs at the ready then make farm-to-table magic. Last Friday, we made a roasted cauliflower with a chimichurri.

Q: You were a science teacher before becoming a chef?

A: It's my job to provide rich exposure and create searing experiences to enrich our interns. I believe that the purpose of education is not knowledge but action. It's one thing to prepare cauliflower; it's a whole other thing to show how to do it side by side. Speaking of, half the kids had never eaten this vegetable and the other half were used to it being prepared in a completely different way.

Q: Last year was your first six-week cohort of students. What has the feedback been?

A: It's gratifying organizationally and individually; they tell us they know they can work hard, work in teams, and understand the food systems to better fight for food sovereignty. This program connects the dots from photosynthesis to ecology; they've become systems thinkers.

Q: Where is the produce you farm distributed?

A: We sell at Cowtown Farmers Market and at CoAct's Mindful Market, but also to restaurants – Ellerbe and Carpenter's Café have used our products.

Q: When kids go back to school, you rely on volunteers to help tend the beds in the spring and fall.

A: We share the property space with Farmers Assisting Returning Military, a nonprofit that helps local veterans tend to the land and recover from their trauma. The interns will be leading volunteers in the fall and spring because they've had extensive training.

Q: FunkyTown Food Project also welcomes individual and group volunteers.

A: There's always a ton to do. Every time you walk onto the farm it's different. We'd love individuals to come and hang out for a few hours, or employers who want to come out and spend a day. Even if you have a black thumb, come on out!

Q: Has the change in Fort Worth's ordinance allowing people to grow food in their front yards helped?

A: Yes. However, I believe it's a will/skill thing. I find that people want to grow something and generally they understand why growing their own produce is the healthier option. But the skill set doesn't particularly match the will. We want to be a part of the solution to narrow that gap with a robust course offering.

To learn more and to get involved, visit
funkytownfoodproject.org.

Visit **LiveLongFortWorth.com** for more information about Blue Zones Project and better well-being

BLUE ZONES PROJECT by sharecare Brought to you by Texas Health

Robert Spano, at T&P Station, is enjoying a new adventure in Fort Worth while still traveling to fulfill guest conducting commitments.

Lasater said. "I think that's an important thing Robert does to keep these young conductors moving to a higher level of developing their skills."

Nearly 200 musicians apply for the conducting school every summer, but Spano only works with 10. Spano said six or seven applicants are admitted, and returning students fill the remaining spots.

"It's highly competitive," Spano said. "Because of that, the people who come are brilliant. They're so talented, so smart, so musical, that it's a joy to work with them."

Spano's teaching days date to high school. He taught music lessons to fund his own composition, conducting, organ, flute, French horn, piano and violin lessons.

Eventually, that became a career path. A few years after graduating Oberlin College and Conservatory in 1984, Spano started teaching there. He worked full time for five years and continued part time for nearly a decade while picking up more conducting and performing roles.

The teaching load at Oberlin had mostly disappeared by the time Spano took the Atlanta music director role in 2001. Aspen's conducting academy helped fill that gap. Spano also created the Atlanta School of Composers while with the ASO.

"Finding that way to try and facilitate someone else's understanding, I'm endlessly fascinated by that," Spano said. "I love the process of teaching. It's a reward that I don't know anything quite like. When people you've helped do well in the world or for themselves, there's a personal satisfaction."

At 14, Spano determined conducting could be another career option. He conducted a self-composed piece of music and discovered that, instead of specializing in one instrument, as many people had suggested, he could learn more instruments and use the knowledge as a conductor.

Growing up around musicians, Spano seemed destined for the music industry. His parents, grandparents and uncles played instruments.

> **"Anyone who does creative work is constantly trying to chase after that vision or dream or the possibility of something that's *mwaa*."**
>
> **— Robert Spano, FWSO Music Director**

That influence helped shape the award-winning musician. Spano is one of two classical musicians inducted into the Georgia Music Hall of Fame, and has received four honorary doctorates and won four Grammy Awards.

He has traveled the world, teaching, conducting and playing music.

"We're lucky," Lasater said. "We're very, very fortunate. I hope more and more people realize that and keep coming and fill the hall. It's a splendid experience."

CHASING PERFECTION IN A NEW WORLD

"Lucky" is a word that keeps coming up in association with Spano. Musicians and staff members say it in reference to the talent, skills, expertise and spirit Spano brings to the symphony. Even musicians outside the organization have taken notice.

"I have friends in other orchestras who say, 'Robert Spano is your music director. How exciting!'" Shih said. "Everybody wants to sort of join in the excitement. It's been wonderful."

The symphony's second season under Spano's direction opens Sept. 8-10, featuring music by Schumann and Brahms. Yunchan Lim, the 2022 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition winner, will join in performing Schumann's "Piano Concerto."

Spano looks forward to the new season and will continue racking up air miles while fulfilling guest-conducting commitments.

He does miss a certain furry family member though while traveling. Maurice, a 10-year-old black pug, helped Spano explore their new home last fall. They uncovered popular downtown attractions, like the Fort Worth Water Gardens. Maurice has been with Spano's relatives most of 2023 since the conductor's travel schedule has picked up steam.

"He's better than people," Spano said. "He takes me [on walks]. I don't take him. He's in charge."

When he's at the loft, it's not uncommon for Spano to pull a book off the shelf, flip on the television and unwind from a long day of orchestra rehearsals, meetings or travel.

He might watch DVR recordings of "The Big Bang Theory," "Everybody Loves Raymond," or "Seinfeld." During the commercial breaks, he will read a few pages of the selected book and then return to the show.

As Spano settles into Fort Worth, one thing remains certain. He will never let the symphony stop chasing perfection.

"Anyone who does creative work is constantly trying to chase after that vision or dream or the possibility of something that's *mwaa*," Spano says while doing a chef's kiss. "The orchestra has that in rehearsal. We're not so good at not judging, criticizing and evaluating ourselves, because we all do that. There's an aspiration level to what we're doing that never goes away."

THE ASPEN TIMES

August 1, 2023

Jaw-dropping Mahler, Rachmaninoff make for great weekend

By Harvey Steiman

Two of the most remarkable performances of the year highlighted a strong weekend of exciting music-making at the Aspen Music Festival. It took something special to top Friday's knockout performance of Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3 by the teenage Yunchan Lim, but Sunday's majestic Mahler Symphony No. 3 did.

Superlative conducting and orchestral playing by musicians at the top of their game combined to produce something like a miracle Sunday. That's what Mahler was after in the six movements of his longest and most joyful symphony. It starts with battling marches, moves through explorations of nature's splendor, detours to uplifting song, and finally builds a series of increasingly ecstatic hymns to a glorious finale.

It just might be conductor Robert Spano's greatest work in a 13-year tenure as the festival's music director. Again and again he found just the right pace and shaped phrases with subtlety and carefully judged dynamics. Over the piece's 100 minutes he laid the groundwork in the musical development with infinite patience to climb several mountaintops in a monumental finale.

The New York Times

February 6, 2024

Robert Spano to Lead Washington National Opera as Music Director

The veteran conductor, who won acclaim as a champion of new music at the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, will begin a three-year term in 2025.

By Javier C. Hernández

The conductor Robert Spano, who won acclaim as a champion of contemporary music during his two decades at the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, will serve as Washington National Opera's next music director, the company announced on Tuesday.

Spano, 62, will become music director designate effectively immediately and begin a three-year term with the company in 2025, succeeding Philippe Auguin, who stepped down in 2018 after his contract was not renewed.

Spano, who serves as music director of the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra in Texas, said in an interview that he had been eager to do more opera since leaving his post as music director in Atlanta in 2021. He said that he wanted to "carry opera into the future" and that he planned to promote contemporary works, as he did in Atlanta.

"New work and masterpieces — they go hand in hand," he said. "I've lived my life in music feeling like the works of living composers inform our understanding of the works of the past. They keep reinvigorating our understanding of these masterpieces."

Timothy O'Leary, the general director of Washington National Opera, said in an interview that he was impressed by Spano's experience and fresh perspective on opera.

"He's got this track record of conducting the major standard works in the opera repertoire," he said, "but he's also really identified with championing new music and the next generation of creators."

The search for music director began in 2018 but dragged on partly because of the pandemic. In the interim, the company has relied on Evan Rogister, its principal conductor. He will step down at the end of the 2024-25 season, the company said on Tuesday, shortly before Spano's term begins.

Spano rose to the top of the list in Washington after making his company debut in 2022 in "Written in Stone," a commissioning project that featured short operas by contemporary composers, including Carlos Simon, Huang Ruo, Kamala Sankaram and Jason Moran.

O'Leary said the company felt an "instant bond" with Spano during those rehearsals and performances.

"Part of why it was such a success," O'Leary added, "was because of his incredible capabilities as a conductor, a technician but also an interpreter of new material."

While Spano has never led a major opera company, he has won praise for his work as a guest conductor. In 2018, he made his debut at the Metropolitan Opera, leading a production of Nico Muhly's "Marnie."

The critic Anthony Tommasini, writing in The New York Times, said that Muhly's score "could not have had a better advocate than the conductor Robert Spano, making an absurdly belated Met debut at 57."

"He highlighted intriguing details, brought out myriad colorings, kept the pacing sure and never covered the singers," Tommasini wrote. "Where has he been?"

Spano will open the season at Washington National Opera this fall, leading Beethoven's "Fidelio." The production is directed by the company's artistic director, Francesca Zambello, and features the soprano Sinead Campbell Wallace, the tenor Jamez McCorkle, the bass-baritone Derek Welton and the bass David Leigh.

Spano said he was optimistic about the future of opera, despite recent challenges. Many companies, including the Washington one, have struggled to get audiences to return since the pandemic.

His hope, he said, is "that we're making great opera happen that attracts people to want to experience it, by that recognition that we're in a living tradition, and not a dead one."

musical america
WORLDWIDE

January 5, 2023

Robert Spano: Principal Conductor of the Rhde Island Phil

By Susan Elliott

Robert Spano, music director of the Fort Worth Symphony and the Aspen Music Festival and School, has added the Rhode Island Philharmonic to his plate, in the position of principal conductor, with immediate effect. He succeeds last season's interim Tania Miller, and Bramwell Tovey, who died in July 2022 after a brief stint as artistic advisor. Spano's appointment is positioned as temporary, during the orchestra's continuing search for a music director.

Founded in 1944, the RIPhil merged with an extant music school in 2000 and now prides itself on being the "only professional orchestra in the country to officially designate music education and performance as equal priorities." The school serves all ages and claims a reach of 13,000 students across Providence and environs.

Spano, who served for 20 years as music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and is now its laureate, has a special propensity for new music and a keen interest in education. How the former will fly in Rhode Island is yet to be tested, but the latter is a trademark, wherever he has been. "My work as a conductor had always included a major devotion to teaching and mentoring young musicians," he said in his comments, "which is crucial to the future of symphonic music."

In addition to his work with living composers (Osvaldo Golijov once called him "a shaman with a beat. Every time I give him a new piece, he understands it better than I do"), Spano has in recent years pursued his own compositional instincts.

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December 15, 2023

Robert Spano in Fort Worth: catching up with the Maestro, thoughts on conducting

By Gregory Sullivan Isaacs

After 30 years as music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, conductor **Robert Spano** recently moved to the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex from Atlanta when he became the newly appointed music director of the **Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra**. Founded in 1912 but temporarily disbanded during both world wars, FWSO is an orchestra with a long and distinguished history.

The orchestra's first concerts were presented in less-than-ideal venues, starting out in the barn-like Will Rogers Auditorium. They moved to the only slightly better Fort Worth Convention Center in 1968. But, it wasn't until the 1998–1999 season that the symphony finally moved into a world-class venue, Bass Performance Hall, and there they remain to this day, except for a temporary displacement during the COVID-19 pandemic where they again gave concerts at Will Rogers Auditorium.

In 2019, Spano first appeared with the orchestra as a guest conductor. His appearance was so successful that the orchestra grabbed onto him. Soon after, Spano was named principal guest

conductor. Then, in 2022, he ascended to the musical directorship, replacing the retiring Miguel Harth-Bedoya, who held the position for 20 years.

Music is Spano's birthright. His father was a clarinetist, a flute designer, and an instrument repair technician. Early on, he naturally studied the flute, as well as violin, and piano. He earned a degree in piano performance at the highly respected Oberlin College and Conservatory. After that, he attended the equally respected Curtis Conservatory of Music, studying with Max Rudolf, an internationally lauded conductor and conducting teacher. Spano has retained an official relationship with Curtis to this day.

In addition to his conducting career, Spano is also known as a pianist and composer. Frequently, he combines these two abilities by playing his own works. I asked him if he was ever unhappy when hearing a recording of such a performance. The ever-practical Spano replied, "Not really, but other performers can bring different insights that are very valuable."

In the future, Spano said that he has some significant appearances on the horizon but that he can't talk about them at the moment. But he will certainly continue his successful stint in Fort Worth and spend his summers teaching at the Aspen Festival.

On January 4, Spano will partner with the FWSO and the Dallas Black Dance Theater in a staging of Stravinsky's neo-classical ballet, Petrushka, as choreographed by Sean Smith. Also on that program are two masterworks by Mozart. One is his Overture to the Opera The Magic Flute paired with his final, perhaps greatest, and longest symphony, Symphony No. 41 ("Jupiter").

But Spano will return to Atlanta in May for two weeks of concerts with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra as its conductor laureate. First, to conduct the marvelous pianist Garrick Ohlsson in a performance of Rachmaninoff's deservedly popular Piano Concerto #3, paired with the world premiere of Concerto for Orchestra by Emmy Award-winning composer Adam Schoenberg (May 9-11). The following week, Spano will lead the ASO in another world premiere, The Sacrifice of Isaac by Jonathan Leshnoff, and Stravinsky's The Rite of Spring.

As you would expect, our conversation eventually turned to conducting and the current assessment of various podium techniques.

I mentioned that, recently, more and more conductors have been eschewing the use of the baton. Spano said: "I am comfortable using a baton, in most cases, but sometimes I dispense with it when conducting some big works, such as Bach's various settings of the Passion." Of course, in Bach's time, no one actually conducted as we know it today. Usually, it was the composer at some keyboard who filled that function.

Also, I mentioned that there are as many ideas about conductor's gestures as there are conductors. Spano offered the following observations.

"Gestures have to be meaningful and convey the music to the performers. Period. There are five categories of gestures, as they relate to both hands: parallel (mirroring) which is different from similar. The others are contrary, counterpoint, and oblique. Each has its own purpose. Mostly, this applies to the use of the left hand, which should offer supplemental information."

He added with a smile in his voice: "…we tell ourselves 'don't mirror', but then it happens anyway. But it is the results a conductor gets, what happens in the actual performance, that matters. I find that one of the best ways to evaluate a conductor's performance is to close your eyes (and just listen). When I teach conducting at Aspen (an internationally recognized summer music festival), it is surprising to hear how different the orchestra sounds with each of the student conductors."

Then I mentioned one universal conundrum with orchestras is how to place the five divisions of string section: first violins, second violins, violas, cellos, and contrabasses. What is the "standard" arrangement anyway? The story goes that it was established in the 1920s by the legendary Leopold Stokowski, the conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra at the time. This is why the arrangement is sometimes referred to as the "Stokowski Shift."

This string layout is in a semi-circle in front of the conductor with the high instruments (violins) on the conductor's left and the lower-pitched instruments (viola, cello, bass) on the conductor's right. The basses are almost always behind the cellos.

In past eras, some composers wrote for the violins to be split up and placed antiphonally left and right. I asked Spano about his thoughts on observing these composers' opinions when playing works that were written for the split violin sections.

Spano said about this, "I tend to go with that standard arrangement these days. The players are used to this arrangement. I have tried other seating plans, but the cellos always sound better when they are on the outside."

Another big controversy is how to find the "correct" tempo, (if there even is such a thing).

Spano offered that "…Tempo is the most difficult challenge any conductor faces. With some composers, such as Mozart, tempo can be determined right from the music itself. Also, Mozart is very careful with his placement of the Italian terminology (allegro, lento, etc.) When I conducted Wagner's Der Ring des Nibelungen (a massive cycle of four operas) in Seattle, my tempi felt faster than usual but were slower when compared to the timings of other conductors."

As to another current controversy, conducting from memory, Spano quoted the famous German conductor, Otto Klemperer, who once quipped that he always used the score "…because I can read music." I added that the presence of the score can be a salvation if something goes wrong.

I am certain that this sort of disaster happened much more with me as a conductor than with a distinguished maestro such as Spano.

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Robert Spano, Conductor
Critical Acclaim

"Robert Spano has that great skill in a conductor of making every performance radiate joy. You would think, each time, that he has been waiting all his life to make this music happen, and that he is darned well going to make it happen to the utmost."

The New York Times

"The revelation of the evening was the detailed shaping of the score by conductor Robert Spano. 'The Aria of the Falling Body' swayed, but with a tensile strength, and the closing pages were a fine demonstration of the very gradual release of musical tension. It's far harder to release than to build up tension, and his success here made the thought of Spano's performing Wagner enticing."

Opera News

"As the cacophonies piled up and the rhythms came apart and the whole thing got really loud --- with percussionist Tom Sherwood whacking the life out of the big bass drum, which was positioned high and in back, like a sacrificial altar --- Spano's concept turned from modesty to savage brilliance."

Atlanta Journal Consitution

"He seems the most comprehensively gifted American conductor to emerge since James Levine, Michael Tilson Thomas and Leonard Slatkin."

The Boston Globe

"It was a triumph for conductor Robert Spano, his Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, the team of vocal soloists, and for Adams's masterpiece itself. Falling temperatures made Spano turn up the interpretive heat."

The Chicago Tribune

"Self-effacing and restrained to a fault, Spano elicited remarkably clean, taut, well-balanced performances from an orchestra that can be recalcitrant with visitors. He invariably mustered a broad dynamic scale, focused telling nuances, sustained forward momentum and avoided cheap effects. For the challenges at hand, it was enough."

Financial Times

"Robert Spano barely broke a sweat as he produced a radiant sound of unusual depth and tension from the [BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra] that was nothing short of dazzling."

Aberdeen Press & Journal

“Spano conducted from his muscles, and what we heard was powerful music, powerfully played. There was no mistaking the authority from the podium.”

The Los Angeles Times

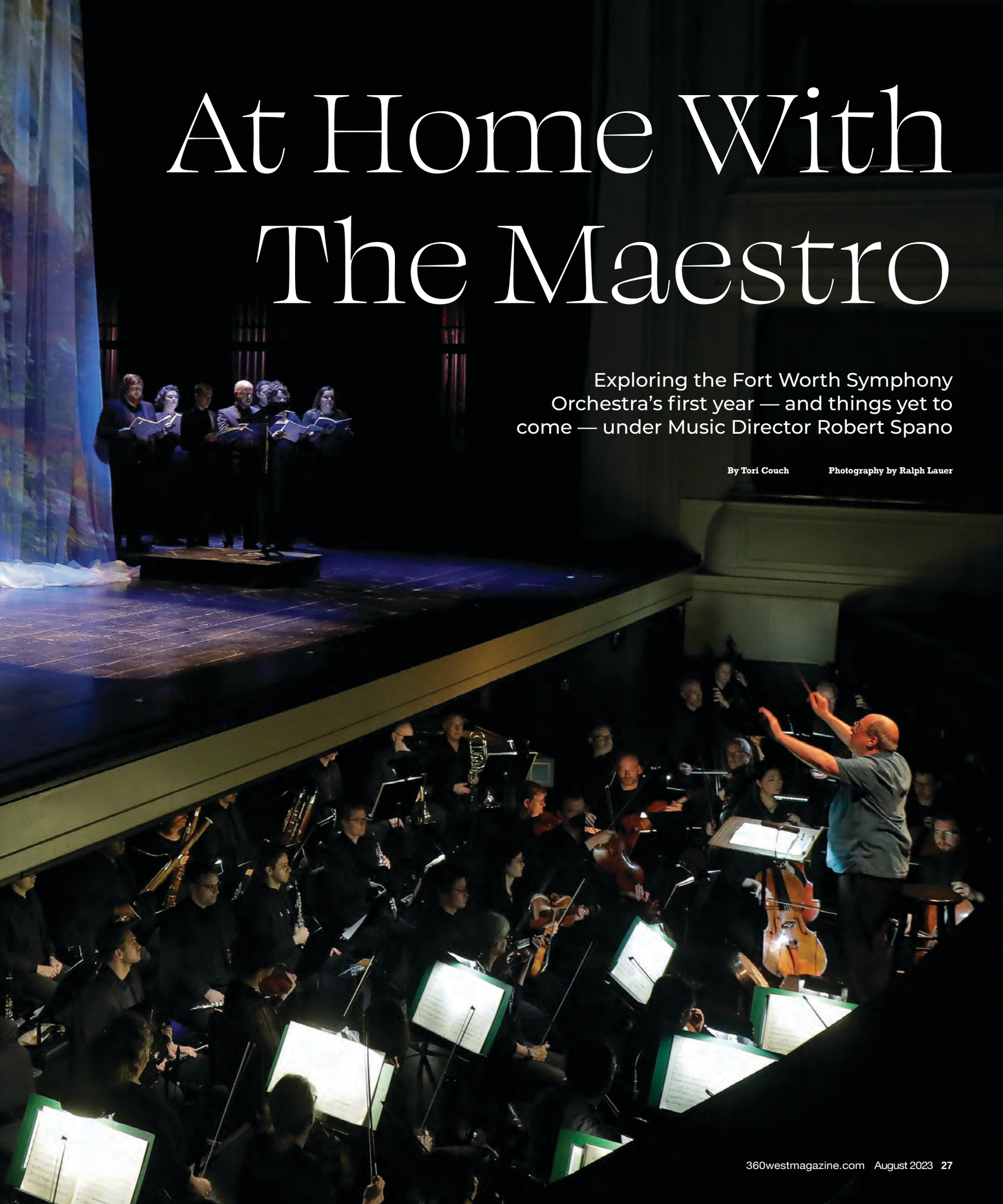
“Atlanta is pretty exceptional because of the strength and passion of the artistic leadership. We’ve had great moments in American orchestral history where a conductor pulls off the difficult feat of putting new music at the front and keeping the audience enthralled. I think [ASO music director Robert] Spano is doing [that] in Atlanta.”

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

At Home With The Maestro

Exploring the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra's first year — and things yet to come — under Music Director Robert Spano

By Tori Couch Photography by Ralph Lauer



Robert Spano's personal library could make an English, religion or philosophy professor blush.

The books Spano "loves to look at" greet him as he walks in the door of his condo at the Texas & Pacific Lofts in downtown Fort Worth.

They include multivolume collections, such as the "Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians" and the 13-volume, original edition of James George Frazer's "The Golden Bough."

The living room wall houses fiction, biographies, plays, scripts, literary criticisms, essays and poetry. In the office, works on psychology and Christian theology fill several shelves. Philosophers and thinkers highlight another wall, and the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra music director arranges them in a specific way.

"I put them in alphabetical order, and I know they're going to hate being next to each other because they're all gonna argue," Spano said. "And I think they should."

Finally, over in world religions, Spano's selections cover ancient Greek beliefs, Taoism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Islam, Judaism and Jewish mysticism.

The books arrived in 140 boxes and are just a portion of Spano's entire library, which had gone into storage for three years. What's more impressive is the self-described biblioholic's sense of recall: He described the collection from memory while sitting in the lofts' resident lounge on a morning in late May.

"I'm sorry I wouldn't let you in the house," he said. "I'm still moving basically. It's been a year, but I'm still moving. I've still got boxes all over the place."

Considering Maestro Spano served as a guest conductor around the country over the past nine months and then hopped on an airplane days after this conversation to direct the Aspen Music Festival and School summer programming, it's understandable that boxes remain unpacked.

The annual trip to Aspen, where Spano has been music director since 2011, capped his inaugural season as the symphony's music director in Fort Worth.

Robert Spano has lived in Fort Worth's Texas & Pacific Lofts since last fall and has discovered downtown favorites like the Fort Worth Water Gardens.

During that 2022-23 season, Spano and symphony CEO and President Keith Cerny reimagined performances based on a vision called Theater of a Concert. This brought new experiences to Bass Performance Hall, including a collaborative performance of Stravinsky's "The Firebird" with Texas Ballet Theater and an interactive staging of the oratorio "Haydn: The Creation."

More collaborative performances and the third year of the Chamber Series at the Kimbell Art Museum are scheduled for the 2023-24 season.

Spano first connected with the symphony in March 2019, as it sought a successor for music director Miguel Harth-Bedoya. Mercedes Bass, chair of the symphony board, asked Spano to serve as principal guest conductor, and he accepted. Bass and Spano had met through Aspen, where she is a trustee of The Aspen Institute and serves on the festival's school advisory board.

Spano — who spent the previous 20 years leading the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra — has ushered in quite a few changes in Fort Worth. So many, in fact, that Cara Owens, assistant principal bassoonist, said the symphony has entered "a brave new world."

ADAPTING AMID A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

Owens and Michael Shih, concertmaster/violinist, have both been in the orchestra for over 20 years, playing under Harth-Bedoya and numerous guest conductors.

"Robert has this wonderful, warm style that he invites all of us in," Shih said. "When we rehearse, you really feel like you are part of this vision that he's trying to create."

Owens also used the word "inviting" when describing Spano's rehearsals. The organization and vision for each rehearsal is its own art form, she said.

"There's no rehearsing in such a manner you get to the end of the two-and-a-half hours and you feel like there's still so much more to do," she said. "He covered everything he clearly wanted to cover."

Spano began his tenure as music director in August 2022 after starting as music director designate in April 2021. He initially signed a three-year contract and recently agreed to an extension through the 2027-28 season.

Spano hit the ground running by hiring almost a dozen tenure-track musicians. These vacant positions could not be filled while the symphony was between music directors.

Even though Spano had interacted with the orchestra before, as the new music director he wanted a better understanding of the group's immediate needs, wants and goals. So he held eight lunch meetings with eight musicians at a time until he met everyone.

"Maybe one of the best things that came out of that process for me is how committed they are to this orchestra, to themselves and to each other," Spano said. "How important it is to them and how invested they are in the enterprise. That's not true everywhere. There's a real spirit in the orchestra."

Spano saw that spirit on full display while guest conducting at a symphony performance in January 2021 amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

It was his first live performance since COVID forced shutdowns across the country in March 2020 and paused live in-person performances.

Cerny and the symphony worked tirelessly to bring back safe, live performances. The organization even kept staff members and musicians on the payroll, said Cerny, who joined the symphony in 2019 and was deep into the music director search when the pandemic hit.

The 2020-21 season started in September 2020 at Will Rogers Memorial Auditorium, since Bass Performance Hall did not reopen in time.

"When we rehearse, you really feel like you are part of this vision that he's trying to create."

— Michael Shih, FWSO Concertmaster

Robert Spano started as music director of the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra in August 2022. Since then, he has worked with president and CEO Keith Cerny to reimagine the symphony experience under a concept called Theater of a Concert.

"We were one of the first orchestras in the country to [perform live]," Cerny said. "We're really proud of that."

COVID performances looked very different from the pre-pandemic days. Instead of musicians forming a tight semicircle around the conductor, they were spread out in a straight line, with 6 feet between each musician and plexiglass separating each row. Musicians had monitors near them, so they could hear other instruments and try to play together. Conductors needed a microphone to address the entire orchestra.

The music might not have been perfect, but the performances provided everyone involved a taste of community and an escape from isolation.

More than two years later, Spano's eyes light up behind his black-rimmed glasses while recalling the January 2021 performance in Fort Worth.

"It was so inspiring to be at Will Rogers during that period," Spano said. "It was a lifesaver."

Mollie Lasater, a symphony board member since 1986, remembers the performance well. There was no intermission or planned break, but at one point, Spano paused and turned to the audience.

"He said, 'I just have to take a moment to tell you that this is a wonderful orchestra and this is the first time I've been able to conduct live in a whole year,'" Lasater said. "It just brought the house down."

Another boon to the symphony's pandemic years was the $8.1 million in government assistance it received, including from the Paycheck Protection Program.

But with that aid ending, Cerny is looking ahead.

He has prioritized expanding the board, bringing in more audience members and finding more fundraising avenues. A tentative budget projection for 2023-24 is more than $15.5 million, Cerny said. The budget in 2022-23 was $15.1 million.

"Three years in COVID, we were able to have essentially balanced budgets, so that was great," Cerny said. "This year, we're raising money as fast as we can."

Cerny negotiated a new three-year contract with the musicians last year. He is also committed to gradually increasing the orchestra's physical size. The symphony hopes to add one new core orchestra member per year during the first three years of Spano's tenure, Cerny said. Currently, the orchestra has 68 core members.

With Spano on board, the symphony's artistic vision is changing, too.

Spano was already thinking about taking the music director position around the time of the January performance, although it didn't fit his initial post-Atlanta plans. He had wanted more freedom in his schedule and

an opportunity to do things differently. But a new path formed when Bass presented Spano with the idea of being the symphony's next music director over dinner in late 2020. The symphony announced Spano would become its 10th music director in February 2021.

"I got excited about the idea and realized I could change my plans for what was coming next in my life," Spano said. "It's been a wonderful thing already."

THEATER OF A CONCERT

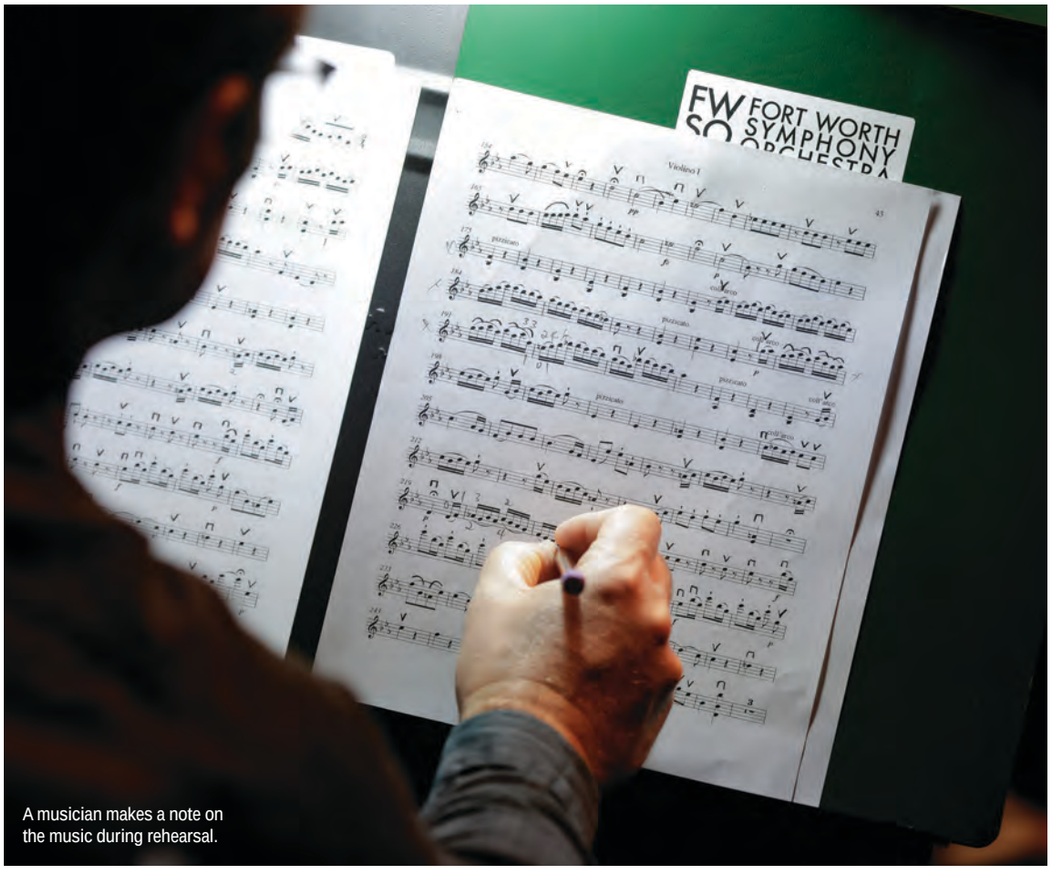
As Tim O'Keefe watched Texas Ballet Theater perform the 1919 version of Stravinsky's Suite from "The Firebird" on the Bass Performance Hall stage in April with the symphony, the ballet's acting artistic director could only imagine what the dancers were experiencing.

"I was so happy for the dancers, because they had that wall of music behind them," O'Keefe, a former dancer, said. "It must have been so fantastic."

O'Keefe choreographed the 22-minute dance for the symphony's "A Night at the Ballet" show, which included visiting composer Brian Raphael Nabors and music from Humperdinck, Griffes and Ravel.

The large-scale collaboration stemmed from Cerny and Spano's Theater of a Concert vision.

"A concert is inherently theater," Spano said. "Then the notion is how do we enhance the theatricality of the experience. What things



A musician makes a note on the music during rehearsal.

Aspen Music Festival and School music director Robert Spano (right) works with Aspen Conducting Academy (ACA) fellow Yuwon Kim at an ACA Orchestra rehearsal. In 2018, Kim earned top honors in Norway's 2018 Princess Astrid International Music Competition. As of 2022, Kim is the Rita E. Hauser Conducting Fellow at Curtis Institute of Music.

Photo by Alex Irvin and courtesy of the Aspen Music Festival and School

contribute to the enjoyment of the audience and of the performers as well. How do we make the most of that reality?"

The Theater of a Concert concept covers a wide range of additional elements and even minor enhancements, Spano said, like interviewing a composer onstage.

The "Firebird" performance was part of a three-year Stravinsky ballet series that continues into 2023-24 with Dallas Black Dance Theatre performing "Petrushka." Cerny is in talks with a third ballet company for the 2024-25 season and had nearly 80 percent of that season planned in May.

Spano and Cerny both have experience with collaborations and find that they stretch the audience's frame of reference around a particular piece of music, Cerny said.

"I've said ["Firebird" is] truly one of the most exciting projects I've produced in my career," he said. "People say, 'Why?' It brought all these elements together that you don't normally see."

Each collaborative project requires detailed, long-term planning.

About 18 months before "A Night at the Ballet" became a reality, Cerny and Spano approached O'Keefe. He jumped at the opportunity and spent countless hours on Zoom calls with symphony staff, working out performance logistics.

Figuring out how 12 dancers and the full orchestra would share the stage took strategic thinking. Limited stage space forced unique prop placement, such as hanging from the ceiling the egg where the antagonist Koschei puts his soul.

O'Keefe started rehearsals about three-and-a-half weeks before the performance. Because Spano's schedule prevented him from attending rehearsals until production week, O'Keefe sent videos so Spano could offer feedback. Cerny attended some rehearsals and provided additional guidance.

During that time, O'Keefe noticed the version of "Firebird" that Spano picked went a little fast for the dancers. Spano happily accommodated O'Keefe's tempo adjustment request.

"He was such a pleasure to work with, but you could tell he was just as

Robert Spano conducts the orchestra during a rehearsal in the 2022-23 season. Spano has conducted orchestras and operas around the world and spent 20 years as music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra.

interested in our needs," O'Keefe said. "Where we were coming from and how we were expressing the music as opposed to how he would express the music and combining that together."

A month after the "A Night at the Ballet" performance, the symphony continued the Theater of a Concert concept. Seraphic Fire, a Miami-based vocal ensemble, and three vocal soloists helped present "Haydn: The Creation."

The orchestra stayed in the pit while singers moved around onstage and images relating to the lyrics were projected on screens and a draped sheet. A digital box above the stage translated the German oratorio into English.

Next season, a collaboration with the Calgary-based touring group Old Trout Puppet Workshop will bring Prokofiev's "Peter and the Wolf" to life with large puppets while the orchestra plays. The symphony will continue doing traditional symphonic performances but occasionally add elements. Collaborating remains a priority.

"Part of our mission is to be mindful that we have these multiple audiences that we want to take care of and appeal to and attract and invite," Spano said. "The variety is necessary if we're to do that."

The musicians enjoy engaging with other performing arts groups, too.

"The various forms of art don't exist in vacuums," Owens said. "Collaboration is what it's about. It just adds depth."

Each season also includes the Chamber Series at the Kimbell Art Museum, a program Spano and Cerny started during the 2021-22 season. It can highlight composers who might not drive ticket sales at Bass Performance Hall or spotlight music intended for smaller ensembles and a more intimate setting, Cerny said.

Spano has played the piano and performed some of his compositions through the Chamber Series. Principal musicians from the symphony have also participated and shared music with audiences of up to 250 people. In October, Cerny is performing Bartók's "Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion" with the symphony's pianist.

The Theater of a Concert vision will keep evolving over the next five seasons. Spano's music industry connections and depth of experience conducting orchestras, choirs, symphonies, operas and ballets constantly brings new ideas, Cerny said.

A joyful personality and a passion for music make the planning process more enjoyable, too.

"It's one of the absolute high points of my job, because he's such a great colleague," Cerny said. "Ultimately, he has final say on many things, but we go through this very intentional, really carefully thought-through process that is so rewarding and tied to the Theater of a Concert strategy."

Spano echoed those feelings when asked about working with Cerny.

"Keith and I were laughing the other night that we never should have been allowed to work together, because we egg each other on," Spano said. "We share a very similar passion around live performance, fascinations with what's possible and what we'd like to explore."

TURNING PASSIONS INTO A CAREER

Spano focuses on the symphony most of the year, but as June approaches, the Aspen Music Festival and School garners all the attention.

Spano has been involved with the festival in some capacity since 1993. He now directs the Aspen Conducting Academy, and oversees programming for more than 300 events and educational programs for 630 students and young performers.

Aspen is where board member Lasater first saw Spano in action. She and her husband have attended the festival for years and financially supported it for more than two decades.

Lasater and her husband, as well as her grandchildren, have watched young conductors from the school learn and grow on the spot.

"They're all dressed in their tuxedos and they might conduct one movement of a symphony,"

SPECIAL PROMOTION

POWER9® PEOPLE

An ongoing series about people improving their well-being

Fort Worth is the largest certified Blue Zones Community® in the country. Each month we talk to a different member of our community and find out how they experience well-being. This month's featured guest is **Reggie Robinson**, Executive Director at the ***FunkyTown Food Project***, which empowers Fort Worth's young people (and adults) to plant and harvest healthy food.

photo by Rodney Johnson

Q: FunkyTown Food Project hires youth during the summer for six-week Seed Crew opportunities. What do they do?

A: We work four days a week from nine until noon solarizing, turning beds, planting beds, harvesting, composting, weeding, watering – everything you need to do in a garden. In the afternoon we do workshops on leadership, community, purpose, and character. We're teaching them that giant walls are built by laying one brick at a time.

Q: What are you growing now?

A: Lettuce, peas, peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers, and herbs like garlic, parsley, and basil. We're planting pumpkins for the fall. One of my favorite features is the time we spend cooking every Friday. It's a chef's dream to have fresh veggies and herbs at the ready then make farm-to-table magic. Last Friday, we made a roasted cauliflower with a chimichurri.

Q: You were a science teacher before becoming a chef?

A: It's my job to provide rich exposure and create searing experiences to enrich our interns. I believe that the purpose of education is not knowledge but action. It's one thing to prepare cauliflower; it's a whole other thing to show how to do it side by side. Speaking of, half the kids had never eaten this vegetable and the other half were used to it being prepared in a completely different way.

Q: Last year was your first six-week cohort of students. What has the feedback been?

A: It's gratifying organizationally and individually; they tell us they know they can work hard, work in teams, and understand the food systems to better fight for food sovereignty. This program connects the dots from photosynthesis to ecology; they've become systems thinkers.

Q: Where is the produce you farm distributed?

A: We sell at Cowtown Farmers Market and at CoAct's Mindful Market, but also to restaurants – Ellerbe and Carpenter's Café have used our products.

Q: When kids go back to school, you rely on volunteers to help tend the beds in the spring and fall.

A: We share the property space with Farmers Assisting Returning Military, a nonprofit that helps local veterans tend to the land and recover from their trauma. The interns will be leading volunteers in the fall and spring because they've had extensive training.

Q: FunkyTown Food Project also welcomes individual and group volunteers.

A: There's always a ton to do. Every time you walk onto the farm it's different. We'd love individuals to come and hang out for a few hours, or employers who want to come out and spend a day. Even if you have a black thumb, come on out!

Q: Has the change in Fort Worth's ordinance allowing people to grow food in their front yards helped?

A: Yes. However, I believe it's a will/skill thing. I find that people want to grow something and generally they understand why growing their own produce is the healthier option. But the skill set doesn't particularly match the will. We want to be a part of the solution to narrow that gap with a robust course offering.

To learn more and to get involved, visit
funkytownfoodproject.org.

Visit **LiveLongFortWorth.com** for more information about Blue Zones Project and better well-being

BLUE ZONES PROJECT by sharecare Brought to you by Texas Health

Robert Spano, at T&P Station, is enjoying a new adventure in Fort Worth while still traveling to fulfill guest conducting commitments.

Lasater said. "I think that's an important thing Robert does to keep these young conductors moving to a higher level of developing their skills."

Nearly 200 musicians apply for the conducting school every summer, but Spano only works with 10. Spano said six or seven applicants are admitted, and returning students fill the remaining spots.

"It's highly competitive," Spano said. "Because of that, the people who come are brilliant. They're so talented, so smart, so musical, that it's a joy to work with them."

Spano's teaching days date to high school. He taught music lessons to fund his own composition, conducting, organ, flute, French horn, piano and violin lessons.

Eventually, that became a career path. A few years after graduating Oberlin College and Conservatory in 1984, Spano started teaching there. He worked full time for five years and continued part time for nearly a decade while picking up more conducting and performing roles.

The teaching load at Oberlin had mostly disappeared by the time Spano took the Atlanta music director role in 2001. Aspen's conducting academy helped fill that gap. Spano also created the Atlanta School of Composers while with the ASO.

"Finding that way to try and facilitate someone else's understanding, I'm endlessly fascinated by that," Spano said. "I love the process of teaching. It's a reward that I don't know anything quite like. When people you've helped do well in the world or for themselves, there's a personal satisfaction."

At 14, Spano determined conducting could be another career option. He conducted a self-composed piece of music and discovered that, instead of specializing in one instrument, as many people had suggested, he could learn more instruments and use the knowledge as a conductor.

Growing up around musicians, Spano seemed destined for the music industry. His parents, grandparents and uncles played instruments.

> **"Anyone who does creative work is constantly trying to chase after that vision or dream or the possibility of something that's *mwaa*."**
>
> **— Robert Spano, FWSO Music Director**

That influence helped shape the award-winning musician. Spano is one of two classical musicians inducted into the Georgia Music Hall of Fame, and has received four honorary doctorates and won four Grammy Awards.

He has traveled the world, teaching, conducting and playing music.

"We're lucky," Lasater said. "We're very, very fortunate. I hope more and more people realize that and keep coming and fill the hall. It's a splendid experience."

CHASING PERFECTION IN A NEW WORLD

"Lucky" is a word that keeps coming up in association with Spano. Musicians and staff members say it in reference to the talent, skills, expertise and spirit Spano brings to the symphony. Even musicians outside the organization have taken notice.

"I have friends in other orchestras who say, 'Robert Spano is your music director. How exciting!'" Shih said. "Everybody wants to sort of join in the excitement. It's been wonderful."

The symphony's second season under Spano's direction opens Sept. 8-10, featuring music by Schumann and Brahms. Yunchan Lim, the 2022 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition winner, will join in performing Schumann's "Piano Concerto."

Spano looks forward to the new season and will continue racking up air miles while fulfilling guest-conducting commitments.

He does miss a certain furry family member though while traveling. Maurice, a 10-year-old black pug, helped Spano explore their new home last fall. They uncovered popular downtown attractions, like the Fort Worth Water Gardens. Maurice has been with Spano's relatives most of 2023 since the conductor's travel schedule has picked up steam.

"He's better than people," Spano said. "He takes me [on walks]. I don't take him. He's in charge."

When he's at the loft, it's not uncommon for Spano to pull a book off the shelf, flip on the television and unwind from a long day of orchestra rehearsals, meetings or travel.

He might watch DVR recordings of "The Big Bang Theory," "Everybody Loves Raymond," or "Seinfeld." During the commercial breaks, he will read a few pages of the selected book and then return to the show.

As Spano settles into Fort Worth, one thing remains certain. He will never let the symphony stop chasing perfection.

"Anyone who does creative work is constantly trying to chase after that vision or dream or the possibility of something that's *mwaa*," Spano says while doing a chef's kiss. "The orchestra has that in rehearsal. We're not so good at not judging, criticizing and evaluating ourselves, because we all do that. There's an aspiration level to what we're doing that never goes away."

Robert Spano

ARTS ATL

June 7, 2023

Q&A: Robert Spano reflects on his ASO tenure and new job in Fort Worth

By James L. Paulk

Robert Spano, who led the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra through an extraordinary 22-year tenure before stepping down a year ago, made his Spoleto Festival USA debut May 26 in Charleston as part of a unique event that celebrated Geoff Nuttall, who died last fall.

Nuttall led the fabled Spoleto chamber music program for the past decade, infusing it with his infectious energy, wit and talent. "Virtuosic debauchery" was the term favored by his friends that best described his work here. As first violin in the St. Lawrence Quartet, he was internationally respected as an artist, but his connection to Charleston and Spoleto was intense.

The featured event of the festival's opening weekend, the concert included an array of guest artists and ensembles, including Anthony Roth Costanzo, Paul Groves and James Austin Smith, among many others. In a style that echoed Nuttall's chamber concerts, each piece was introduced by a presenter who reminisced about Nuttall.

Spano led the Spoleto Festival Orchestra in the first movement of Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1, with Stephen Prutsman as the spirited soloist. Spano and the strings were then joined by cellist Alisa Weilerstein for a gut-wrenching rendition of Fauré's mournful, *Élégie,* a work which seemed especially appropriate both for the dedication to Nuttall and for Memorial Day weekend.

The orchestra then retreated, and the balance of the program consisted of chamber and vocal works.

ArtsATL spoke with Spano on the day prior to the concert. (Full disclosure: The author, a longtime classical music writer, is senior annual giving officer for the ASO.)

ArtsATL: *Tell us about your connection to Geoff Nuttall.*

Robert Spano: Geoff was an amazing musician, but also an amazing human being. Tremendous energy; tremendous passion; great collaborator. We shared a passion for some of the same composers. This event is a testament to his life's work — that all these people are coming together to celebrate that. It makes us happy to see each other. Even in death, he is bringing us together: people I haven't seen in years. That's sort of the point: to remember that beautiful part.

ArtsATL: *You led the ASO for 22 years, including some difficult times, helping it to emerge from debts and lockouts; restoring the complement; surviving the pandemic without laying off musicians; and building a harmonious relationship with the musicians and the administration. Your leadership and collaborative approach were major factors in all of that, but you also refined the orchestra's sound, and the chorus has remained very strong. Of course, you're not entirely gone . . . you'll be back to lead concerts next spring. What are your hopes for the ASO as it builds on your legacy?*

Spano: I've been trying very hard to be a good ex-music director, to keep my nose out and steer clear. Of course, I talk to people and I hear things. I still love the orchestra very much. I can't wait to be back. I'm also gratified when I hear that great things are happening, like the *St. Matthew Passion* — I hear it was absolutely wonderful. If I were still to have a vision for the orchestra, it would be that it continues to thrive — it's truly a great artistic institution. And I think one of the unique things about Atlanta in *the* world of music is the ASO Chorus. The chorus and orchestra together are something unique in the world.

ArtsATL: *You're now completing your first year as music director at the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra. You're programming new music, including Jennifer Higdon, while showing deference to Fort Worth's unique heritage by inviting the winner of the Van Cliburn competition to perform with the orchestra. You've been getting great reviews: Scott Cantrell (longtime critic at the* Dallas Morning News*) has noted that you've been finding "new versatility and subtlety" in the orchestra's sound and suggesting that you and the orchestra have "a great future ahead." What does that future look like to you, and how is your approach different from that in Atlanta?*

Spano: I do try to be sensitive to the fact that some things are transferable, others are site-specific. Even though we have Jennifer Higdon in the last concert, who is such a fundamental part of the Atlanta School of Composers, she has her own place in Fort Worth, predating me. I was quite determined, as we work with living composers, that we not repeat, or try to repeat. Because the way things evolved was organic — it certainly wasn't mechanical. It was a matter of creating these relationships with composers, and a similar process will be necessary in Fort Worth.

Fortunately, my executive director in Fort Worth is very passionate about living composers, so he and I are taking a lot of care about who we're inviting and what we're inviting them to do, in a

similar way to how we did it in Atlanta, but unique to our situation.

The amazing thing about the Covid period in Fort Worth is that we were continuing to have auditions: I've already hired 13 musicians, some in key positions, because we were holding auditions all through that time, which was very rare. We still have some positions to fill. We're on a growth trajectory for the size of the orchestra. We're currently adding one new position a year for three years, and we'll see what happens after that.

We're also looking to expand the classical part of our season, and we're looking for new venues to do that in because we do not own our home in Bass Hall. We're a tenant of that performing arts organization. So, for us to expand the calendar, we have to find new venues in the area to present in. The exciting thing is that new venues have been built in the past few years. There are a lot of things going on about the growth of the orchestra, and even the personnel of the orchestra. It's exciting — it's a moment where the institution seems ready for this growth spurt.

ArtsATL: *When you arrived as music director at the Aspen Music Festival and School, you talked about your passion for living American composers, and how "engagement with new music vivifies our experience of older music." You said you were focused on "bringing music itself into the future." In Atlanta you created the Atlanta School of Composers, and when you return next spring you'll be conducting world premieres of works by Adam Schoenberg and Jonathan Leshnoff. How do you see the Atlanta School evolving now?*

Spano: It's not up to me, but I hope it does evolve, and I'm sure it will. The Leshnoff and Schoenberg pieces were commissions that were Covid cancellations. I was always careful not to define the Atlanta School too carefully. People would ask "who is in it?" and I would say, "Well, I can tell you at least four or five of them." But it's more of a fluid idea than a fixed identity. That's why it was such a valuable thing to do, and I hope it continues to evolve.

ArtsATL: *Last week in the* New York Times*, Maureen Dowd wrote about the feeling that classical music is enjoying a renaissance. Are you still optimistic about music's future?*

Spano: I know there's a lot of pessimistic talk. I also know that's been around since I was a kid. Sixty years later, we're still going! I have trouble believing the pessimistic reports. Because I'm at Aspen every summer, I see this whole new generation of people with immense talent, intelligence and passion for music. And every summer, my fellow faculty members and I say, "Are we making this up, or are they better?" And we keep deciding they're really better every year.

The pessimists look at classical attendance from a traditional lens in terms of the numbers, but without context as to who's going where for what. I remember a few years ago, (ASO executive director) Jennifer Barlament had some interesting statistics on how theater, dance and other forms of entertainment were seeing more attrition than classical music.

I think it will settle itself given the talent and the intelligence of the young people who are so committed to music in the world. And maybe it was ever thus. We all tend to think of what we have as having been there for a very long time. Well, orchestras have existed in the form that we experience for less than a century.

So how it's structured, how it's presented, and when — that might change. But I have a lot of trust.

I can't think of a time in history when there wasn't great music going on. In some of the worst situations, some of the most deplorable situations, great music was still thriving. I need only think of Shostakovich's *Leningrad Symphony,* Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*, and Haydn's *Mass in Time of War*. You know there's never been a time without great music. I have a lot of faith in that.

Robert Spano

Fort Worth Star-Telegram

September 12, 2022

Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra opens season with 'excitement,' new music director

By Dalia Faheid

When Keith Cerny started as president and CEO of the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra in January 2019, he knew one of his most important responsibilities was working to recruit a new music director.

A committee of board members, staff and musicians reviewed various candidates, believing that conductor, pianist and composer Robert Spano was a longshot because he was so in-demand and busy with various projects. But then COVID upended musical performances, and Cerny took the opportunity to recruit Spano.

With his inaugural season beginning Sept. 9, four-time Grammy Award winner Spano is now the tenth music director in the history of the orchestra, which was founded in 1912. He's been involved with the orchestra since 2019, first as principal guest conductor, then as music director designate in 2021. After Miguel Harth-Bedoya stepped down from his role of 20 years, Spano stepped into an initial three-year term as music director in August.

"This is a momentous time for the Fort Worth Symphony," Cerny said. "There's so much excitement about his appointment because he's universally

seen as an exceptional musician, and also just a great colleague."

Maestro Spano had a two-decade tenure as music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, which he transformed "into a world-class ensemble and an incubator for new American music," says NPR. As music director of the Aspen Music Festival and School since 2011, Spano is known for his innovative programming, which the New York Times called "an engaging reciprocity between the old and the new, the familiar and the fresh."

In his new role, Spano will be conducting six orchestra programs per season, overseeing the orchestra and music staff, working closely with Cerny to shape the artistic direction of the orchestra and drive its growth and serving as an ambassador for the orchestra and classical music in Fort Worth.

"I am thrilled to be joining the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra and looking forward to getting better acquainted with the vibrant culture of this remarkable city," Spano said in a news release. "Every facet of the orchestra is clearly committed to its success—the management team, the supporters, the audience, and certainly the marvelous musicians who make up the orchestra itself. I look forward with tremendous excitement to our concerts next season, and to creating an inspirational 2022–23 season, which will be our first complete season together."

This past weekend, Spano brought to life Brahms' lyric Variations on a Theme by Haydn and Schubert's mysterious "Unfinished" symphony. Pianist Jorge Federico Osorio kicked off the season with Beethoven's "Emperor" piano concerto, a work known for its grandeur, bold melodies and heroic spirit. The orchestra calls it "a quintessentially classical evening."

"One of the many wonderful things about working with Robert is his sheer versatility, so he can go from a program like for this opening weekend, which is by design classics of the repertoire into a more contemporary program with works by Gershwin," Cerny said.

The first time the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra's principal trumpet Kyle Sherman performed alongside Spano was in March of 2019, when they played Mahler's Symphony No. 5.

"He's very collegial. He's incredibly clear. He's a joy to be around. I find his interpretations exciting," Sherman said. "He's just a wonderful guy, fantastic musician. And it's been a blast so far, and I'm just really excited to continue our work together."

As music director, Spano plans on expanding the orchestra's symphonic series. FWSO has done 10 symphonic weekends per season in the past, which will be upped to 11 this year, and 12 next year and the year after that. Spano and Cerny will build up the orchestra by adding one position a year, with the goal of getting the core orchestra up to 70 or more musicians. Since April 2021, when Spano became music director designate, the orchestra has hired nine tenure track musicians.

They're also working with the Texas Ballet Theatre for "a night at the ballet." Later this fall, FWSO will bring in several opera singers.

The most notable change will be in artistic direction, Sherman says, including programming choices, the way the music is interpreted and expressed, and what kind of sound they're looking for from the orchestra.

Working with Spano, principal keyboardist Buddy Bray says the transition has been easy because he takes a collaborative approach to music.

"You get the sense when Robert is on the podium that all 80 of you are creating something together, that he's sort of creating a feedback loop there. It's not just maestro and 80 people doing what maestro says, it's all sort of a collective," Bray says. "The thing that makes us really love Robert so much is that he comes alive in the presence of music. He gets a smile on his face, he loves it so manifestly that you can't help but love it too."

"Fort Worth is a city on the rise, and it's far from being one of the country's best kept secrets when it comes to the arts," Sherman said. "So big things are happening here."

Robert Spano

culturemap
FORT WORTH

September 6, 2022

Renowned maestro Robert Spano picks up baton as new Fort Worth Symphony music director

By Stephanie Allmon Merry

Robert Spano is cruising through the Colorado mountains, his 10-year-old pug Maurice asleep in the backseat.

It's the last full week of August, and — in music parlance — Spano is between movements. He's just wrapped up another summer as music director of the Aspen Music Festival, and he's now en route to Fort Worth, to begin his tenure as the 10th music director of the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra. First he'll swing through Atlanta, where he'll pack some last things from his 20 years as maestro of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra.

With Spano, the FWSO begins a new era — a new music director with new vision that includes new musicians, new-to-Fort Worth composers and guest artists, and even the launch of a new series.

In a 30-minute phone chat just past Vail, Colorado, Spano (safely from the passenger's seat) literally shouted with joy from the mountaintops about getting started in Fort Worth. Ahead of the FWSO Opening Night performance on Friday, September 9, here is Spano, in his own words, on his move to Fort Worth and aspirations with the orchestra.

CultureMap: How is your move from Atlanta to Fort Worth going?

Robert Spano: I have a condo that I'm moving in to right after we do the first concerts, and I've never been in it. I bought it with the Realtor, on the phone, showing me everything in the condominium, and it looks great. I hope I like it as much as I did on my phone. *(He laughs.)*

I tried to get a different condo in that building — the Texas & Pacific Lofts in the old train station — but I didn't move fast enough. So I knew that I didn't have time to come see it in person or I'd lose this one, too. The movers are coming to Atlanta and bringing everything to Fort Worth after we open the season. *(And yes, he says, Maurice — pronounced "Morris" — is moving, too.)*

CM: You retired from the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra after a glorious two-decades-long tenure. Now, at age 61, why are you choosing to "start all over" in Fort Worth when you could be enjoying retirement?

RS: So, in truth, I wasn't looking for another post. I was looking forward to not having that responsibility indefinitely, just some years of

freelancing without being in charge. And I was coming to Fort Worth anyway while they were looking for Miguel Harth-Bedoya's replacement, as principal guest conductor, as kind of a stabilizing element in a period of transition. But then, when I started working with the orchestra, I was having such a wonderful time.

(FWSO board chair) Mercedes Bass, who is so devoted to the orchestra, is an old friend of mine from our years in Aspen. Finally at dinner one night in Fort Worth, she said, "Well, why don't you just do this? We could have such a wonderful time. Why do I have to look for somebody else?"

CM: Did that surprise you?

RS: I was taken aback by surprise, and I was very excited, because I was having such a wonderful time with the orchestra itself. Mercedes' passion for the orchestra is so real and infectious. And (FWSO CEO) Keith Cerny is relatively new to the orchestra as the executive. And he, too, is a kind of power house and a real visionary leader for the orchestra.

So seeing that the administration and the board and the players themselves are all so deeply invested in what the next chapter of the orchestra is, I really got caught up in the enthusiasm. And it's exciting to come into an institution at a time when so many things are right. Miguel did such a wonderful job for two decades, and it just makes the orchestra all the more ready for more.

CM: You have a three-year contract with FWSO, and it seems someone of your career stature could live anywhere and fly in and out. Why did you choose to put down new roots in Fort Worth?

RS: Oh, I think it's so important to live where your orchestra is. I know, from my decades in Atlanta, how important it was to me that I lived there for as long as I was with the orchestra. My predecessor Miguel Harth-Bedoya has been in Fort Worth about as long as I've been in Atlanta. And he always made Fort Worth home, I think, for the same reason. It's just so important to be rooted.

CM: Miguel also became very involved in the community, teaching in the schools and universities, just as you did in Atlanta. Do you plan to continue that in Fort Worth?

RS: Oh, absolutely. That's the reason to move. Miguel and I have known each other a long time, and we share the same attitude about that, so I'm hoping I can follow in his footsteps and continue that engagement.

CM: You've guest-conducted the orchestra, but how do you start building a whole new relationship with them as THE music director?

RS: I've now met with every member of the orchestra in groups of about eight people at a time. Over the course of the year, I had a chance to hear from every member of the orchestra about what's on their minds — what's important to them, what they're concerned about, what they're happy about, what they're not happy about, what they would like to see happen. So that initial kind of meeting and sharing of thoughts is so valuable.

Also this year we're starting up a chamber series at the Kimbell, and I don't want to be a hog forever on these programs *(he laughs, noting that he's playing piano on all three of the concerts)* ... but I'm looking forward to playing chamber music with members of the orchestra, so we can really get to know each other.

And then also I got to know many of the players, in terms of what they're thinking and what they're listening for, because we have had a lot of auditions. We've hired about 10 new members of the orchestra — isn't that amazing? And that's a process that's done with representation from the orchestra.

CM: Are you replacing musicians who've left, or are you expanding the orchestra?

RS: We're actually in the middle of doing both, but we're not expanding that fast. The 10 we just hired were kind of circumstantial regarding who had retired or left — some really important positions.

This year and next year and the next, we're adding one player a year to the permanent roster of the orchestra — so it's a three-year plan that we'll revisit and potentially continue to do. For instance, we just hired an English horn position, and there wasn't an English horn position before in the orchestra. So, that's been wonderful excitement.

We're also adding a week to the subscription season each year. Those are two, sort of, incremental growth plans that we're enacting.

CM: What kind of input did you have planning this upcoming season?

RS: I was on board long enough ago that none of it was planned without me. That was fun because right away, Keith and I were planning not just this season but the next couple of seasons, as well. They're not completely planned, but we know there are certain projects that we're wanting to pursue over those multiple seasons. And we're looking ahead to certain things that we want to plan far enough in advance, to make sure we can do the way we'd like — that's been exciting, too.

CM: This season spans from a night of Wagner to a collaboration with Texas Ballet Theater. How did you put it together, and did you feel any pressure since it was your debut?

RS: I guess I did. I didn't think of it, but now that you mention it, yeah, I was planning my first season there. *(He laughs.)* But I always feel the pressure planning a season anywhere because you're trying to satisfy so many agendas, and it's wonderful. I love it, but it's hard. And then you have to keep re-evaluating whatever it is you decided to do and see if you feel that it's balancing out based on all the different things that matter.

(It's very much like being) a museum and a gallery, where we have our standing exhibits of the great masterpieces of classical music, and then we have our gallery that changes, and we're exploring things that are less well-known or are new. And that is an important part of the balance.

CM: You don't just have one audience, but multiple audiences to satisfy, right?

RS: Different people are hungry for different things, seeking different experiences. (We have to consider) are we attending to the interests that have been expressed? Are we taking care of the orchestra, making sure they're challenged and engaged and playing at the top of their game? Are we doing enough things that we know will be financially successful and sell tickets? And then sometimes there are things that are really important to do that aren't going to be bestsellers, but they're still worth doing for the mission of the institution.

CM: On opening weekend, you're doing Brahms, Schubert, and Beethoven's "Emperor" Concerto. How did you put that opening weekend concert together?

RS: We had, I guess, about 15 versions of that opening weekend at different times. What we knew was that we wanted something that would feel like a great launch to the season. And then eventually, we latched onto this idea of really focusing on the classics and doing some of the most-loved music in the world and making that the "party" to start the year with.

I also wanted to introduce this pianist, who is making his Fort Worth Symphony debut. Jorge Federico Osorio is just a magnificent pianist, who I had

not known until maybe 10 years ago. He's had a long career and he's one of the most elegant and beautiful pianists of the classic repertoire. So when we were able to get him for that week, the "Emperor" was sort of the kingpin, and then we added the Brahms and the Schubert.

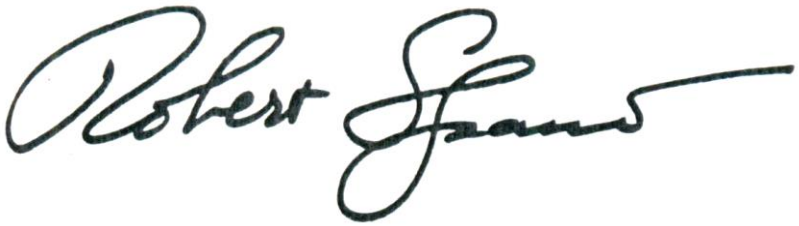
CM: In keeping with your passion for championing living composers, you have a couple of world premieres programmed this season — tell me about those.

RS: There's a saxophone concerto in October. And this is a performer (Joe Lovano) who has had a huge career as a jazz player. He's also a great improviser, and we already got together last year and played through the work in progress, so we've already had a taste of what's to come. And it's really quite amazing. The combination of his jazz background and what the orchestra's doing and the ways that the composer (Douglas J. Cuomo) set up improvisational possibilities — it's pretty wonderful.

And then later, a piece by composer Brian Raphael Nabors. He's just amazing. We put him on a program in our imagination. But then I talked to Brian about it and asked him if he was happy about the idea, and I got lucky because he was thrilled about the idea. He's on this program with Texas Ballet Theater, where we're doing *The Firebird*. All the pieces on that program are stories or tales. I said, "What do you think, Brian?" And he said, "Oh, I've been trying to write some pieces on these African folktales I know." And so he's doing that.

CM: When we get to the end of the season, what will a successful first year have looked like, or felt like, to you?

RS: I guess it would be as simple as knowing that we all had such a wonderful time experiencing this music together, that we can't wait to do the next season.



June 9, 2022

Conductor lifts his baton for last time heading Atlanta Symphony Orchestra

By Bill Liss

For Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, it's the end of an era.

The orchestra's Music Director and Conductor Robert Spano will raise his baton for his final performances on June 9, 11 and 12. Spano's headed the Symphony for 22 years, leading it to seven Grammy Awards.

With boundless energy, total concentration and conducting intensity as he lifts his baton, Spano has left his mark on the Atlanta Symphony.

"I am very proud that I hired more than two-thirds of the orchestra at this point as we lost talent to other opportunities; and as we lost talent due to retirement," Spano said, reflecting on his more than two decades with the orchestra.

When Spano first joined the Symphony in 2001, he had a shocking start.

"Right when we started, 9/11 2001 in New York happened, and many concerts were canceled around the country. Ours was enough days later, so I said 'Let's not cancel,'" Spano said.

But he faced a serious issue on what music would fit the moment.

"We chose to do Tchaikovsky's 6th Symphony and I will never forget the feeling in the room because everyone needed some healing power of music and at that moment, that symphony spoke to that situation, and it was an electric night," he emotionally added.

As Spano proudly points to the new composers he introduced to Atlanta, he also takes pride in the programs he fostered for more than two decades impacting metro Atlanta's youth.

"Music is one of the greatest antidotes to troubled youth and it has been proven in many circumstances how effective engaging in music changes everything. And to the extent that we are able to impact that with our efforts to reach young people throughout the city in a myriad of ways with many different programs we try to make that connection," Spano emphasized.

But for Robert Spano leaving Atlanta is far from the end of his distinguished career. He will continue as music director at the Aspen Music Festival, adding:

"I am taking over the Ft. Worth (Texas) Symphony in the Fall. It is a new challenge; a different one, and I was just too excited not to take it," he enthusiastically added.

This weekend, there will be a unique twist to his last Atlanta Symphony concerts.

On Saturday night, the performance of Mahler's 3rd Symphony will be shown live on the giant wall of the High Museum in the Plaza between the Museum and Symphony Hall. For those who cannot make it to the Woodruff Arts Center, the Saturday night concert will also be available via Livestream online here, as well as on the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra's Facebook page and YouTube channel.

Robert Spano

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

November 8, 2021

ASO fund cements Robert Spano's new music legacy

By Jon Ross

Over the past two decades, Atlanta has secured a laudable reputation as an incubator for new classical music. While Beethoven and Brahms and the standard orchestra repertory receive a fair share of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra's attention each season, music director Robert Spano and the rest of the artistic staff have worked hard to present compositions created by living composers.

Jesse Rosen, the former head of the League of American Orchestras, pointed to Spano's dedication to comingling new music with more familiar repertoire as one of the main reasons Atlanta is well regarded in the classical world.

"Under Robert Spano, sustained commitment to an engagement with a group of composers places the Atlanta symphony in the forefront of new music and how orchestras can be involved with new music," he said. "That's something that many orchestras have looked to as an example of a very deep and effective way to engage with living composers and their music."

Next fall, Nathalie Stutzmann will become the fifth music director in the ensemble's history. New music will likely remain a focus. But with the departure of such a key figure in Atlanta's quest to broaden the classical compositional field, there has been some concern new music might not be as much of a focus in subsequent years.

To ensure the ensemble's dedication to new music continues, the ASO has developed the Spano Fund for New Music. The fund kicks off Nov. 19 at

Symphony Hall with a concert featuring world premieres of works by composers Michael Gandolfi and Krists Auznieks. Joining Gandolfi's piano concerto and Auznieks' "Sub Rosa" is a trio of pieces performed by the ASO in recent years: Michael Kurth's "Everything Lasts Forever," Adam Schoenberg's "Luna Azul" and "Onward" by 2019 Rapido! Competition Contest winner Brian Nabors.

The fund will ensure the ASO can continue commissioning and presenting works from living American composers even after Spano begins his new job as music director of the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra. All ticket revenue from the evening will be donated to the fund. The ASO has also put together a ticketed pre-concert dinner and a post-concert reception available to the public for additional donations.

Made possible through a lead gift from the Antinori Foundation, the fund will cover commissioning fees and related expenses, the cost of guest artists for performances and expenses associated with bringing commissioned composers to Atlanta to work with the ensemble.

Many of the new music commissions during Spano's tenure with the orchestra have come out of the so-called Atlanta School of Composers. The idea began in 2002 with Jennifer Higdon's composition "Cityscape," expanding into an ever-widening group of composers associated with the ASO. (School in this context is more "school of fish" than an educational institution.)

"It was born of the attitude of, 'Let's have a few composers that we really get to know,'" Spano said. "Let's make them part of the musical family. Let's play more than one work of theirs; let's play it more than one time." For him, the purpose of the fund is clear: "To be sure that no matter who was here, the orchestra could continue to do this work."

Each Atlanta School member has a deep, enduring relationship with Spano. The original cohort of Higdon, Gandolfi, Osvaldo Golijov and Christopher Theofanidis grew to include Schoenberg and, later, a second wave of composers including Kurth, who has played in the ASO's bass section since 1994. The ASO released an entire recording of his works in 2019, with "Everything Lasts Forever," a constantly shifting but groove-based three-movement composition, as the title track.

"This concert … it's a big part of his legacy here, and we want to honor that," said Kurth, who is currently finishing up the first draft of a bass concerto to be premiered in an upcoming ASO season.

"(Spano has) been such a gift to this community," Kurth continued. "He's left this orchestra in top shape, not just technically and not just musically, but morale-wise."

Gandolfi sees the Atlanta School of Composers as the ASO making a sustained commitment to commissioning and offering repeat performances of works by an expanding roster of American musicians.

"A living composer shouldn't expect that their piece is going to be treated like a repertoire piece because there's just too much stuff out there," he said. "But Robert does it that way."

Exposing audiences to a handful of composers repeatedly helps the composers create a following.

"I can't think of anything else that's like it. These pieces don't just get premiered … they get recorded, they get multiple performances over the years," he said. "What's nice about Atlanta is the orchestra knows us."

Pianist Marc Andre Hamelin, who makes his ASO debut performing Gandolfi's concerto, has a decades-long association with Spano. The pianist wrote in an email that he's eager to witness the relationship Spano has cultivated with the ensemble over the past 20 years.

"Listeners are going to encounter a work that's very accessible, pleasantly propulsive, with a tonal language that will feel familiar," he said. "I've come to realize that a part of any audience is wary of unknown works, however friendly they might end up being to their ears and hearts."

Beyond the inner circle of the Atlanta School, Spano continues to reach out to young composers, commissioning new works and championing their voices.

Auznieks got to know Spano through the Aspen Music Festival, where the conductor is artistic director. Auznieks won a prize through the festival to create a new work for the Aspen Philharmonic Orchestra, and Spano was soon programming that work, “Crossing,” in Atlanta. An ASO commission, which resulted in “Sub Rosa,” soon followed.

“Robert is a brilliant artist and a true advocate of new music,” Auznieks stated in an email. “He has the gift of being able to see how musical works fit in various contexts and how to surround them with other pieces so that the new work can speak and breathe.”

“Onward” by Brian Nabors first came to the orchestra in 2019 after Nabors secured the commission for winning an Atlanta-based competition that tasks composers with writing a piece between four and six minutes in length within a two-week time frame. As the winner, Nabors got to create a new piece for the ASO. In addition to his involvement with Spano in Atlanta, Nabors is currently working on a new commission for him to conduct in Fort Worth. The ASO’s sustained support has helped open new doors for the composer, something that wouldn’t have occurred with a typical commissioning relationship.

“Most of the time we have the one-and-then-kind-of-done,” he said of orchestras that commission a work to perform it a few times and then file it away. “It’s so cool just to have people champion your music not only to do it again themselves but to send it out so other people continue to do it as well.”

Nabors hopes more orchestras take Spano’s cue, leading to “little hubs of new music” around the country where composers living and working today can find creative and engaging orchestras to perform their work. This music, he said, which is classical in sound and instrumentation, might ultimately benefit from a less restrictive genre descriptor.

“I think about it now as contemporary concert music,” he said. “People are just really hungry for a good story, something that can keep them interested, entertained and just sucked in.”

Spano will soon move to Texas and pass the duty of cultivating new music to Stutzmann. While she will ultimately be in charge of the artistic direction of the ensemble, one of her roles will be shepherding compositions created through the fund — a mandate Spano said he is thrilled to share.

“Knowing that someone so capable and musical and committed and serious as she is, is taking over just makes me feel great,” he said. “I don’t know how they could have chosen anyone better.”

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

May 6, 2021

Audience to return to Symphony Hall for ASO's 77th season

By Jon Ross

Atlanta Symphony Orchestra conductor Robert Spano is staying around for another year to welcome audiences back to Symphony Hall. Instead of taking a sabbatical after stepping down as music director after 20 years at the helm, he will help lead the ASO during its 77th season, which starts September 19.

Donald Runnicles, principal guest conductor since 2001, and Spano will share artistic advising duties as co-artistic advisors for the 2021-2022 season.

The new season, which begins with a performance of Beethoven's fifth symphony, isn't just a rehash of last year's originally planned 2020-2021 program, although many highlights remain. The new season closes with Spano leading the orchestra in Mahler's Symphony No. 3 – a performance holdover from the season that never was

– and three of the five world premieres slated for this coming year were scheduled to be performed last season. Many of the guest artists and conductors that were to appear have adjusted their schedules accordingly.

"We wanted to give Robert a chance to conduct the great events we had planned for his final season as music director," said ASO executive director Jennifer Barlament. Though the hall will be open for in-person listening this fall, the ASO is still finalizing audience capacity and protocols. Virtual broadcasts of ASO concerts will continue.

When planning safety measures, Barlament consulted with a team of medical experts, some of whom sit on the ASO's board. She knows the plan they've put in place may have to be adjusted by the fall, but is confident audience attendance is safe. New safety investments include updated airflow and ionization systems.

"Even if it's not 100 percent of the hall and even if people have to wear masks, it will be possible to get back to in-person live concerts," she said, "and we really couldn't be more excited about that."

The pandemic also dashed any hopes of a proper celebration of the ASO Chorus, which turned 50 last year. Choral works are planned to resume in March, with the chorus set to perform requiems by Mozart and Durufle in addition to the Mahler symphony.

Barlament called the season a "proper send-off" for Spano, who was to begin his term as ASO's music conductor laureate in 2022 after a sabbatical. Instead, Spano has accepted his new title a year early and will work closely with Runnicles, who has signed a new contract with the ASO through the end of the 2022-2023 season. The two are used to working closely together to shape season offerings, but this year, Runnicles will share more of the conducting duties than in the past. More than a dozen guest conductors, including frequent visitors like Nathalie Stutzmann and Gemma New, will also help out. These guests could be interviewing to succeed Spano in the music director post. The search process was slowed due to COVID-19 and has no end date.

Diversity among guest musicians, conductors and featured composers is a major current running through the season. The ASO counts 23 compositions by female and traditionally underrepresented composers during the season, including compositions from Sarah Gibson, Anna Clyne, Brian Nabors and James Lee III. World premieres include Xavier Foley's "Concerto for Double Bass" and Conrad Tao's violin concerto.

As for the musicians themselves, the ASO is still defining orchestral safety protocols. Barlament said the ensemble will look more traditional than the socially distant, masked orchestra seen during streaming performances. She said the "vast majority" of the orchestra is vaccinated – though there is no vaccine mandate for musicians – and this allows the ASO to be a little more flexible with on-stage arrangements.

"I just can't emphasize enough how critical vaccination is to our being able to return to normal life and all of the great things that make normal life wonderful," Barlament said, "like going to concerts."

5 can't-miss performances

October 13 and 14: Nathalie Stutzmann returns to the ASO to conduct a program that includes Missy Mazzoli's "Dark with Excessive Bright."

November 19: Two world premieres highlight this new music program, which also features "Everything Lasts Forever" by ASO bassist Michael Kurth and guest pianist Marc-Andre Hamelin.

March 17 and 18: Stutzmann is back once again to conduct the ASO Chamber Chorus in Mozart's "Requiem."

March 24 and 26: Guest conductor Jonathon Heyward leads the ASO and guest artist Xavier Foley in the bassist's new concerto.

June 12: Robert Spano bids the ASO farewell with Mahler's third symphony. Mezzo-soprano Kelley O'Connor, the ASO Chorus women and the Gwinnett Young Singers assist.

Robert Spano

The Dallas Morning News

February 9, 2021

The Fort Worth Symphony taps Robert Spano as its next music director

Spano will begin as music director in fall 2022. He will succeed Miguel Harth-Bedoya.

By Tim Diovanni

The Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra has announced the well-known American conductor Robert Spano as its next music director, starting in fall 2022. In the meantime, starting in April, he'll be music director-designate.

He will succeed Miguel Harth-Bedoya, whose 20-year leadership turned a formerly provincial orchestra into an accomplished and versatile ensemble that made several recordings and played Carnegie Hall.

Spano, 59, is best known for his 20 seasons as music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, a position he's leaving in June. Since 2011 he has also been music director of the prestigious Aspen Music Festival and School in Colorado. Before Atlanta, he quickly rose to national attention as music director of the Brooklyn Philharmonic in New York, where his adventurous programming drew critical acclaim.

It was considered something of a coup when the Fort Worth Symphony hired Spano as its principal guest conductor in 2019. He made his conducting debut with the orchestra leading performances of Mahler's Fifth Symphony and Strauss's *Four Last Songs*.

“I just fell in love with the orchestra,” Spano said in a phone interview. “Their clear devotion to what they’re doing, and their artistry and what is obviously their aspiration to making great music is inspiring.”

Spano returned for another program in January of this year. That’s when Mercedes Bass, chairman of the FWSO’s board, and Keith Cerny, president and CEO of the FWSO, began discussing the music directorship with him.

“He is absolutely the right man for the job at this point in our development as an orchestra,” Cerny said. “And I think he’ll build on Miguel Harth-Bedoya’s exceptional legacy and really take the orchestra even farther.”

As music director, Spano will conduct six of the 10 symphonic programs each season. He’ll also supervise the orchestra and music staff, and be expected to socialize with patrons and donors.

One of his initial responsibilities will be to preside over filling currently empty principal viola, bassoon and horn positions. The orchestra already has talked with him about scheduling auditions.

The music director search committee was headed by Bass, who met Spano at Aspen, where she serves on the advisory board. In 2014, Bass founded a scholarship in Spano’s name for Aspen Conducting Academy fellows.

“We are great friends,” Bass said, adding that their friendship had “nothing to do with” Spano’s appointment as music director.

“Ninety-nine percent of the time when you interview and hire conductors, you know their performances and quality of musicianship. You don’t know their character. And here we know his talent and character. So there are no surprises.”

The committee also included board and staff members, along with musicians. Longtime concertmaster Michael Shih, who was on the committee, praised Spano for his lucid approach. “He tells us exactly what he wants,” Shih said. “And he does it in such a gentle and inspirational way. When he’s on the podium, we just want to work that much harder.”

Cerny noted the search committee “looked at a range of candidates, including some diverse ones, as we brought in guest conductors,” although he didn’t name others considered.

At the Atlanta Symphony, Spano has developed a reputation for championing the music of living American composers. Although his vision for the FWSO is still unclear, he said his commitment to contemporary music won’t change.

Spano grew up in a musical family in Elkhart, Indiana. His father worked at the instrument manufacturer Gemeinhardt as a flute maker, and played the clarinet; his mother was a pianist. “Studying music was a very natural thing,” said Spano, who started on piano, before learning flute and violin. (An accomplished pianist, he often performs chamber music with colleagues.)

Following studies at the Oberlin Conservatory and the Curtis Institute of Music, Spano struggled to land a conducting gig at a professional orchestra. But he broke through in 1990, when he was chosen as an assistant conductor at the Boston Symphony. There he trained under the eminent Japanese conductor Seiji Ozawa.

Spano will move to Fort Worth when his directorship begins in fall 2022. He looks forward to familiarizing himself with the city, which he said he doesn’t yet know well.

“I’m so excited about all of this,” he said. “It’s a great new adventure.”

Robert Spano

AJC
Atlanta. News. Now

Febraury 9, 2021

Robert Spano leaving Atlanta to direct Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra

By Bo Emerson

Robert Spano, whose 20-year tenure leading the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra ends this spring, will become the next music director of the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra.

Beginning in the 2022-2023 season Spano will replace Miguel Harth-Bedoya, a Peruvian transplant who has led the Fort Worth orchestra since 2000.

The Atlanta organization announced Spano's plans to leave the ASO in 2018. Since then the Atlanta Symphony has been conducting a national search for a replacement. None has yet been named.

The Fort Worth Symphony is among the few orchestras nationally that have continued performing in front of audiences during the pandemic. The orchestra has incorporated stringent precautions for these concerts,

performing for fewer than 500 people at a time in the 2,000-seat Bass Performance Hall.

That dedication is one of the qualities that attracted Spano to the Texas organization, where he has served as principal guest conductor during the past year.

“Working with this orchestra is so inspiring, they are so committed and passionate,” he said in an interview from Fort Worth, where he planned to make the announcement in person.

When Spano, 59, announced plans to leave the ASO, he suggested he might spend more time composing, and that he would enjoy taking a break from the consuming role of leading an orchestra.

The offer from Fort Worth came as a surprise he said. “My expectation was to have a few years of being principal guest conductor (in Fort Worth) as they continued the search to replace Miguel,” he said.

“I was looking forward to having at least a couple of years of not having that responsibility. Of being a little more of a free agent.”

Then Fort worth made him an offer he didn’t want to refuse. “This one person in particular who is very important as a supporter of the institution took my arm and started twisting it, and I said you don’t have to twist too hard.”

Fort Worth has a smaller budget and a shorter season than Atlanta’s season, performing about half the number of concerts. Spano said he hopes that reduced workload will liberate some time for composing. He said he spent most of last summer’s canceled season writing music, and some of the new songs he created for mezzo-soprano Kelley O’Connor will be released on video later this spring.

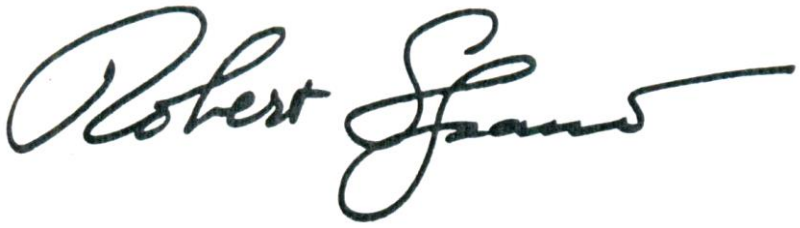
During the pandemic, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra has continued staging virtual concerts, filming their performances and streaming them online.

Spano becomes Fort Worth’s music director designate this spring, and will help plan the 2022-2023 season, making administrative and other “extra-musical” decisions between this April and August 2022, when he assumes the music director’s role.

In a statement, Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra president and CEO Keith Cerny said Spano is a fitting successor to Harth-Bedoya and expects Spano to “lead the orchestra to even greater musical acclaim.”

Fort Worth’s board chair Mercedes T. Bass said, in a statement, that the arrival of Spano “is a dream come true for me, and I know the community of Fort Worth will welcome him with open arms. He is gentle and kind, as well as a very interesting and fun person.”

Spano said though he plans to move to Fort Worth, he will maintain a connection with Atlanta. “It’s hard to leave,” he said.



December 1, 2020

Robert Spano Receives Georgia Governor's Award For The Arts And Humanities

The awards were presented in partnership with the Georgia Council for the Arts and Georgia Humanities.

Governor Brian P. Kemp and First Lady Marty Kemp today announced the recipients of the ninth annual Governor's Awards for the Arts and Humanities. The awards were presented in partnership with the Georgia Council for the Arts and Georgia Humanities.

"I'm honored to recognize the organizations and individuals whose efforts have preserved and enhanced our culture and stories to create a better Georgia," said Governor Kemp. "When our arts and humanities sectors thrive, we see prosperity and revitalization in communities across our state. I applaud the work of each of our recipients of the 2020 Governor's Awards for the Arts and Humanities and the valuable impacts they have made in our state."

"The arts and humanities play a vital role in making Georgia the best state in the country to live, work, and raise a family," said First Lady Marty Kemp. "Brian and I are so proud to honor the work of these incredibly talented individuals and organizations, and on behalf of all Georgians, we're grateful for their important contributions to the Peach State."

Maestro Robert Spano is one of ten members of Georgia's arts and humanities communities who were awarded with this honor following a competitive selection process from nominations submitted from around the state. The recipients represent a diverse group of individuals and organizations that have contributed to, and supported the growth of, Georgia's thriving creative industries through community involvement, pioneering programs and long-term financial commitment.

The recipients of the 2020 Governor's Awards for the Arts and Humanities are:

Maestro Robert Spano, Atlanta
Blue Ridge Mountain Arts Association, Blue Ridge
Museum of Arts and Sciences, Macon
Dr. Eddie Bennett, Decatur
Mr. Brian Brown, Fitzgerald
Mr. Kevin Cole, Atlanta
Dr. Jim Hammond, Atlanta
Ms. Yvonne Grovner, Sapelo Island
Mr. William S. Morris III, Augusta
Ms. Susan Majette Murphy, Darien

An acceptance video featuring each of the recipients of the 2020 Governor's Awards of the Arts and Humanities, accompanied by additional details about their contributions is available, and Robert Spano's segment can be seen here.

The 2020 Governor's Award for the Arts and Humanities features a

poem composed by Georgia Poet Laureate Chelsea Rathburn. It was designed, illustrated, and letterpress printed in a limited edition by Tennille Shuster.

CPR Classical

July 30, 2020

Wandering Bears And Competing With Thunderstorms Among Music Director Robert Spano's Favorite Things About Aspen Music Festival And School

By Jen Hitt

2020 marks Robert Spano's 10th year as music director of the Aspen Music Festival and School. His arrival in 2011 helped smooth over festival leadership drama. The fourth music director in over 70 years, he's spent the last decade overseeing the enormously talented group of over 650 students and 130 faculty each summer. COVID-19 forced AMFS to pivot this year, moving all of their programming online.

To celebrate Spano's 10th anniversary, we asked him to share his top ten favorite memories for CPR Summerfest:

1. "That intimate theater magic" at the historic Wheeler Opera House

"The operas I've performed and heard at the Wheeler - that intimate theater is magic," Spano says. First built in 1889, the Wheeler Opera House has been renovated and expanded numerous times in it's 130 year history. The restored box seats, proscenium arch, and Victorian-era fire curtain provide a perfect space for Aspen Opera Center programs during a typical AMFS summer, now under the leadership of former opera student Renee Fleming.

2. Thunderstorm vs. Orchestra at the Tent

The Benedict Music Tent opened in 2000 replacing the Herbert Bayer designed tent from 1965. Its three open sides allow for mountain breezes and sounds to flow freely into the 2,050-seat venue. Spano recalls, "Most thunderstorms win the 'volume contest' with what's happening on stage at the Tent, but not when the performance was of the Scythian Suite of Prokofiev!" This celestial-themed piece makes good use of a full brass section and extensive percussion, drowning out nature's music during the 2017 performance from the Aspen Philharmonic Orchestra.

3. The Delicate sound of Midori's solo Bach at the Tent
The acoustics of the Benedict Music Tent also benefit solo voices, like the encore from world-renowned violinist Midori in 2016. "Midori played an unaccompanied Bach movement a few summers ago that was absolutely transcendent," remembers Spano. "For me, that represents all those surprisingly intimate experiences that happen at the Tent."

4. The Immense Forces The Tent Can Contain
The large stage of the Benedict Music Tent provides the opportunity for more complicated productions. In 2013 Spano led the Aspen Festival Orchestra, the Colorado Symphony Orchestra Chorus and a cast headed by Anthony Dean Griffey in a semi-staged concert of the full opera "Peter Grimes". Spano remembers the performance fondly, "The spectacle that Tent can accommodate!"

5. The Intimacy of Harris Concert Hall
"Performing or attending concerts at Harris Hall are equally and differently gratifying. That's an intimacy rarely found among the world's stages," explains Spano. Harris Hall sits next to the Benedict Music Tent with a somewhat unassuming facade. But enter the building and descend the long stairwell to the 500-seat hall and you're in for a warm indoor acoustic for a variety of AMFS chamber concerts and educational events.

6. An Inspiring School Campus
In 2016 AMFS opened the $75 million dollar Matthew and Carolyn Bucksbaum Campus as the center for its teaching activities on 38 acres a few miles from downtown. Spano enjoys the building which was "so brilliantly designed by Harry Teague. Our campus remains a source of inspiration every summer." It serves upwards of 650 students each summer.

7. When a Student has an Aha! Moment
The Aspen Conducting Academy is a key draw for Spano, who leads the nationally revered training ground for aspiring conductors who often go on to take posts with prestigious orchestras across the U.S. and Europe. Spano enjoys working with these talented conductors and witnessing their progress, "I remember advising Stephen Mulligan to dig deep for the emotional intensity needed to conduct Tchaikovsky's Pathétique. He delivered a performance that had us all in tears." The top conducting prize winner from each of the last ten summers at the AMFS performed this impressive show of gratitude online for Spano's mentorship earlier this month.

8. That Time a Bear Came Lumbering Into My Home
With all of the modern buildings and amenities in Aspen, you might forget that it's a mountain town at heart. But Spano is unlikely to ever make that mistake after one memorable evening, "I was watching television and I was alone in the house. Often our Artistic Administrator, Mr. Santourian will come and recap the day, so I hear the screen door open and I think 'well it's gotta be him'. So I get up to greet him, and this bear is halfway through the door on all-fours! I just started screaming at the bear to 'Get out of my house!' I charged him, flailing and screaming, not realizing what I was

doing. Fortunately I made enough noise that he did back up and I slammed the wooden door in his face. *Then* I was terrified."

9. The Resounding Brass of Opening Convocation

Each year the first notes AMFS students make together are very special, especially "the sounds of the newly-assembled brass playing Strauss in the Tent for Opening Convocation every summer. The majesty of that moment lets us all know: the Festival has truly begun," explains Spano.

10. A Surprising Gift Secures a Legacy for Future Conductors

Philanthropist Mercedes Bass is the Vice Chairman of the board for Carnegie Hall, is on the board of The Aspen Institute, has a tier named after her at the Metropolitan Opera and has long been a supporter of AMFS. Bass surprised Spano at one of the weekly Aspen Conducting Academy concerts in the Tent in 2014. "She announced that she was establishing a scholarship in my name for future ACA Fellows. I was, and am, overwhelmed by her generosity," explains Spano. The Robert Spano Conductor Prize carries with it the invitation to return to Aspen the following summer as an Academy Conductor on fellowship. For 2020, the prize was awarded to Piotr Wacławik.

THE ASPEN TIMES

July 2, 2020

Inside the making of the virtual Aspen Music Festival season

By Andrew Travers

The Aspen Music Festival and School's summer concert season is normally a logistical feat to behold, though most listeners never see or think much about the massive behind-the-scenes operation that moves pianos and orchestra equipment from venue to venue for some 400 concerts nonstop for eight weeks.

For the summer of coronavirus, as the festival moved all of its programming online, the technical achievement is no less complicated. It may be more of a feat, it turns out, to bring together artists on stages around the world for live concerts under the virtual Aspen tent.

The virtual Aspen season starts this weekend with a Fourth of July concert of patriotic favorites, recorded at the annual holiday concert in recent years at the Benedict Music Tent. On Sunday, the festival launches its first live event, for which it is bringing out some of the Music Fest's favorite stars to honor music director Robert Spano, who is celebrating his 10th year in the post.

The live performances on the show will include some artists performing in Aspen.

The pianist Yefim Bronfman, who is living here for the summer, will perform from Harris Concert Hall (as he did this week for the virtual Aspen Ideas Festival). Mezzo-soprano Kelley O'Connor will also perform from the Harris stage, as will Michelle DeYoung (who lives in Boulder).

Violinist Robert McDuffie and Spano himself will be on a stage in Macon, Georgia, and most of the guest artists are strewn about the U.S. and abroad. Renee Fleming will be performing from her home studio in Virginia, Roderick Cox will be live from Berlin. Concerts in coming weeks will come live from Seattle (James Ehnes, July 12), from La Jolla (Alisa Weilerstien and Inon Barnatan, July 26), with others coming from Steinway Hall in New York, Switzerland and elsewhere.

A remote production team and fleet of sound engineers have been setting up the concerts — sending artists equipment, tweaking it for their varied settings and preparing what the Music Fest hopes will be a virtual experience worthy of the talents on the bill and

seven-plus decade tradition of Aspen concerts.

“The team is working in advance and will be working live to make sure that this is worthy of who we are,” Music Festival President and CEO Alan Fletcher said.

The producer-director of the series, Habib Azar, was a student of Fletcher’s at Carnegie Mellon University. In an Emmy-winning career overseeing multi-camera broadcast of live events, Azar has produced the Metropolitan Opera’s “Live in HD” series and “Live from Lincoln Center” and has — through the COVID-19 crisis — helped many presenters go virtual, producing concerts for Juilliard and the New York Philharmonic along with the Music Fest.

Producing this Sunday’s concert, and the weekly recitals running through Aug. 23, Fletcher and festival leaders sought to make something meaningful — not simply a placeholder during the public health crisis.

It’s not as simple as flipping on Zoom and letting it rip.

The festival sought to create the highest quality audio and video experience possible, Fletcher explained. They put together kits with their favored web cameras, microphones, lighting kits and such, sent them out to the participants and have been running test concerts and sound checks with all of them.

The details are not something Fletcher and his colleagues ever anticipated being mired in. On a conference call with presenting executives around the world discussing the intricacies of virtual concerts, Fletcher recalled, one arts leader chimed in, “If I wanted to do this kind of thing I would have gone into TV and I would have made a lot more money.”

And yet, the challenge to serve loyal audiences and find new ones through this crisis is fulfilling, Fletcher said: “Also it is exciting and fun.”

Enough so, Fletcher said, that he believes the Music Fest will continue making live virtual content in the years to come — even after gathering for concerts is safe again. The educational programs they’re crafting, which begin next week and are also free, have been particularly exciting to think about as part of an ongoing curriculum in ears to come.

“We are learning about producing really meaningful content that can reach people all over the world,” Fletcher said. “We will continue with that.”

The Music Fest team also put a guidance page on its website, directing viewers on how to get the best quality audio-visual experience from the webcasts (best experienced through a TV and with a stereo system rather than laptop or phone speakers).

The concerts will be hosted on YouTube, broadcast on the aspenmusicfestival.com and Facebook Live. Fletcher said his team explored more customized platforms than YouTube, but found it was the most accessible around the world — so listeners nearly everywhere should be able to watch the programs.

Virtually, the festival may be able to be more inclusive than it’s ever been. Its programs could potentially reach a more diverse audience. Fletcher is hopeful on that front.

“We are finding that maybe we can reach people that might never have made a trip to Aspen,” he said, “but now that we are doing everything we do for free we might be able to reach some communities that we were unable to reach before.”

Robert Spano

Atlanta

December 5, 2019

Best of Atlanta 2019: Arts & Culture

Best Musical Legacy: Atlanta Symphony Orchestra

One of Atlanta's crown jewels is celebrating its 75th birthday this year. Throughout the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra's illustrious history, it has entertained world leaders, brought Oscar Award–winning films to life by performing scores live on stage, and won numerous Grammy Awards. Through collaborations with dancers, authors, and actors, music director Robert Spano has proven that classical music is vital. He founded the Atlanta School of Composers to nurture a new generation—with the symphony performing nearly 100 contemporary works, including seven ASO-commissioned world premieres, two additional world premieres, and one U.S. premiere. This season opened in September with violinist Joshua Bell, and renowned musicians Itzhak Perlman, Midori, Emanuel Ax, and André Watts will join later in the season. Bravo!

Robert Spano

11ALIVE

October 2, 2019

Robert Spano retiring from Atlanta Symphony Orchestra capping 20-year career

Spano will leave the Atlanta Symphony with an enduring legacy that includes millions of dollars in scholarship offers for aspiring musicians.

By William Liss

Click to watch or visit http://bit.ly/2MlXXWs

Next season, Robert Spano, musical director and conductor of the Atlanta Symphony, will retire after a 20-year career leading one of the nation's top orchestras.

During his tenure, he has made an indelible mark on Atlanta. Robert Spano made his Atlanta Symphony debut during one of the most difficult moments in U.S. history.

It was just days after 9-11.

As America tried to absorb the enormity of that day, Spano was about to launch his career heading the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra.

"I moved here from Brooklyn. We were opening just after 9-11 and that was one of the most powerful evenings I ever had in my life," Spano said. "We did Tchaikovsky's 6th Symphony, Pathetique. It speaks to grief, suffering, and pain and it felt so right even though nothing is right at such a moment."

During his tenure here, Spano has fostered a program to encourage young and emerging composers to debut their commissioned works in Atlanta.

"The great thing for us has been that the composers we have cared about, championed, and invested in, in so many ways, are now some of the most successful composers in the world and that is thrilling," he said. "They got their start here and they say it."

Also among Spano's passions are concert, mentoring and music appreciation programs in the schools for the younger generations.

“In my mind, it is the most important thing we do," he said. "Hands-on teaching of aspiring musicians."

And in the past two years alone, the results have been extraordinary.

Eighty-nine young musicians have been offered $16 million in scholarships for continued musical education.

“The Talent Development Program that we have and the Youth Orchestra. They represent some of the most important work we do because they are the seeds that will blossom into flowers in the future," he said.

One of the students is Joshua Williams.

A student at Tri-Cities High School in East Point, Georgia, he took up the tuba and, with mentoring and tutoring from Atlanta Symphony musicians, he was recently awarded a full scholarship to the Julliard School of Music in New York.

But one enduring question remains for Spano, who has four honorary degrees, including one from Emory, and six Grammy Awards: What lies ahead?

“I love writing music; I love playing the piano; I love teaching and I love conducting," he said. "Now, I balance those things at different times in my life, but I will do next remains to be seen, which is a nice opportunity for me.”

“I am enjoying not knowing which is a little scary, but also really wonderful,” Spano added.

While Robert Spano considers his next career, he said he will continue as music director of the Aspen Colorado Music Festival and School for another five years. He's already been there for the past five.

And he said he will continue as the principal guest conductor of the Fort Worth Symphony as well as guest conducting leading orchestras throughout the world.

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
ajc.com

September 4, 2019

Collaboration epitomizes Robert Spano's legacy with the ASO

By Jon Ross

Walking briskly to center stage, as he had done countless times for 18 seasons with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, director Robert Spano was thinking about leading the orchestra through the tricky grooves of Michael Kurth's "Everything Lasts Forever." The audience greeted him, unexpectedly, with a raucous standing ovation.

It was January 2018. Just two days earlier Spano had announced he would leave his post at the end of the 2020-2021 season. The rare, pre-concert cheer seemed a cathartic response from an appreciative community. For a generation of ASO patrons, Spano simply is the orchestra; he's all they've ever known.

Once at the podium, Spano, a wry smile on his face, seemed to bow a little longer and a tad deeper. The conductor, musician and composer has been central to the symphony's success for nearly two decades.

Heading into its 75th season, which opens Sept. 20 with violinist Joshua Bell, the ASO is celebrating a milestone birthday, but also reflecting on Spano's career. The fourth music director in ASO history, Spano has had a significant impact in shaping both the sound of the orchestra — he has hired roughly a third of the current ensemble — and the symphony's image, both locally and nationally. He has pushed the musicians to stay engaged and challenged by

commissioning new works from young composers like Kurth, an ASO bassist, while Spano's novel collaborations with modern dance troupes and theater companies have infused old works with whimsy and imagination.

Spano arrived in Atlanta in 2000, following the departure of music director Yoel Levi and in the wake of the death of Robert Shaw, the venerated ASO music director who formed the chorus and brought the orchestra from a regional ensemble to worldwide acclaim starting in the late 1960s. Previously, Spano was steering the Brooklyn Philharmonic and keeping up a steady calendar of guest conducting and piano gigs. (He remained Brooklyn's music director until 2004.) But he longed for a new artistic endeavor.

That undertaking took the form of a lasting partnership with the ASO and an eventual alliance with principal guest conductor Donald Runnicles. Spano can still remember when he, then music director designate, huddled together in a Delta smoker's lounge at Atlanta Hartsfield-Jackson Airport with Runnicles and ASO President and CEO Allison Vulgamore for the first of myriad discussions about the future of the orchestra. They ended up hatching a unique collaboration among conductors that would sustain the ASO's creative energy well into the 21st century.

"I really wanted to come to Atlanta, and I was sure it wasn't going to happen because that's what I wanted," Spano, 58, said. In Atlanta, the usual role of the music director as a top-down leader was to immediately give way to an egalitarian model. "Part of it was the idea that (Donald and I) would be a team. That was such an appealing idea to me, and it was something that was even more rewarding than I could have anticipated."

Group effort

Collaboration is in the ASO's DNA. It is perhaps most apparent in the so-called War Room, where ASO staff can give input on programming for upcoming seasons. Seeking input from diverse voices allows the ASO to better connect with its audience, giving concerts a more communal feel, said assistant conductor Stephen Mulligan.

"Robert is really big at building consensus," Mulligan said. "He feels that the results will be better if more people in the orchestra and in the staff are energized and motivated intrinsically to contribute."

Within the organization, people who have worked closely with Spano point to his dazzling intellect, intense curiosity and dedication to teaching and nurturing new musicians and conductors as keys to his success. Principal clarinet Laura Ardan has known Spano since he first arrived and often has experienced the freedom he gives orchestral soloists.

"He will wait for you to have an idea, and that's a very, very different concept than other conductors," said Ardan, who is commissioning Spano to write a duet for clarinet and piano. "It creates a really different performing experience."

Another significant collaborator is the ASO's volunteer chorus, which remains one of the organization's greatest assets. Here, Spano's alliance with Norman Mackenzie, ASO's director of choruses, gives contemporary audiences a direct link to the choral legacy of Robert Shaw.

"There are marvelous, marvelous orchestral conductors, who just kind of don't know what to do in front of a large chorus when they get on the podium," Mackenzie said. "The brilliant thing was, Robert (Spano) was great in front of the chorus."

Within the first few years after taking the podium as music director, Spano and the ASO began commissioning and recording substantive orchestral works from composers such as Christopher Theofanidis, Jennifer Higdon, Osvaldo Golijov and Michael Gandolfi. These composers came to be known as the Atlanta School of Composers. Over the course of Spano's tenure, he and the ASO have expanded the roster.

Kurth has become part of the second wave of the Atlanta School of Composers. The ASO has commissioned a number of his compositions and

released a recording of his works earlier this year.

"I love playing modern music with him, especially when it's mine," Kurth said of Spano. "When we're playing mixed meter stuff or really bombastic stuff, he just shows you with his whole body and his whole soul how the music should go."

Spano's creation of the Atlanta School is now a model for orchestras throughout the country looking to create more new-music programming. The ASO's recent hire of Elena Dubinets as the chief artistic officer is a sign that this thinking will outlast Spano's tenure. She helped commission scores of new works during her long tenure at the Seattle Symphony.

"Robert has really identified a group of composers who have some commonalities, at least aesthetically. That's something that many orchestras have looked to as an example of a very deep and effective way to engage with living composers and their music," said Jesse Rosen, president and CEO of the League of American Orchestras.

Highs and lows

Success for Spano's ASO has ebbed and flowed. In 2012 and 2014, the ASO musicians found themselves locked out by management over contract disputes, and those events had a devastating and lasting impact. Ardan said that even today, the orchestra isn't back to where it was before the first lockout. Through it all, she said, Spano stood up for his musicians in the labor dispute. Ardan and her colleagues are now under contract through 2021, thanks to early negotiations led outside the public eye by ASO President Jennifer Barlament, and management touts a five-year string of financial surpluses. But the past still casts a shadow.

"It's so painful that it's not something one forgets," Spano said. He is still trying to reconstitute the orchestra with auditions for new musicians, and will continue to do so during his final two seasons. "The restoration is still real. But I do think we're well past getting back on our game, so to speak, and I'm very proud of how the orchestra sounds and how they're playing."

Even after two decades and two lockouts, Spano relishes the relative scrappiness of the ASO.

"I've heard that said often in my time here that we punch above our weight. Relative to orchestras with which we are often in league, we're operating with a shorter history, with a smaller budget, " Spano said. "We've done things that other institutions have looked to and said, 'Oh, we need to find our way of doing that.'"

The next phase, the ongoing hunt for its next artistic leader, calls for a bit of soul searching from the ASO. A search team has been formed, but there's hard deadline for a decision on a new music director.

"It's an iterative process," Barlament said of the music director search. "Things take twists and turns, and you think you know from the beginning where you're headed and somebody pops out of nowhere and surprises you. So we're exploring many options and thinking really hard about priorities and where we want to go in the future."

Shaping a future

For now, Spano plans to maintain his residence in Atlanta because the community has become his community. Barlament has said Spano will return on a regular basis to conduct the symphony and chorus, but he will also serve as principal guest conductor of the Fort Worth Symphony, leading the orchestra in two concerts each season for the next three years. Beyond those plans, his calendar is open.

"My whole life I've juggled with playing piano and writing music and conducting and teaching," Spano said. "My passion and interest for all those things remains, and so how I might balance my life differently now is a very interesting question."

Spano's stamp on the orchestra, and his role in the creative partnership that began with Vulgamore and Runnicles, will outlast his stay in front of the orchestra.

“Robert’s legacy is his effusive, charismatic, persuasive personality, his passion for contemporary music and his passion for mentoring young conductors,” Runnicles said. “He has expanded the orchestra’s and the chorus’s experience of music, and with that he has expanded the experience for the audience.”

This year’s 75th season is a birthday party for the orchestra, but it’s just the start of a continued celebration for Spano.

Robert Spano
The New York Times
January 23, 2018

Robert Spano Will Leave the Atlanta Symphony After 20 Years

By Michael Cooper

Robert Spano, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra's music director since 2001, will step down after 20 years.

The conductor Robert Spano, who made the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra a force to be reckoned with in contemporary American music, announced on Tuesday that he would step down as music director in 2021, after completing his 20th season.

Mr. Spano, 56, is the fourth music director in the orchestra's history, and he used his tenure to champion new music, regularly programming works by living composers — including Jennifer Higdon, Michael Gandolfi, Osvaldo Golijov and Christopher Theofanidis — who he presented to audiences as "the Atlanta School of Composers." During his tenure to date, the orchestra has performed 49 world premieres, commissioned 28 works and co-commissioned another 13.

"The thought of leaving is overwhelming, but it's the right thing to do," Mr. Spano said in a telephone interview. "Twenty years just seemed like a good benchmark to say, O.K., time for something new — for me, for the orchestra, for everybody. And that's healthy."

He leaves behind a legacy of Grammy-winning recordings. One of them — his 2006 recording of Mr. Golijov's opera "Ainadamar," featuring the acclaimed Atlanta Symphony Chorus — won two Grammys, for best opera recording and best contemporary composition.

When the orchestra's management, struggling with deficits, locked its players out in 2014, for the second time in two years, Mr. Spano took the rare step for a music director of speaking publicly on behalf of the musicians, more than 40 percent of whom had joined the orchestra during his tenure.

He lamented that the players had "been asked to leave the building," leaving Atlanta "with a deafening silence." When the lockout ended, he worked with the orchestra's board to raise more than $27 million to restore 11 positions.

Mr. Spano kept the orchestra's profile high with tours, including to Carnegie Hall, and recordings. During his penultimate season, in 2019-20, the orchestra will celebrate its 75th anniversary with a series of special projects and events.

He said that he hoped to be able to devote more time to composing and to conducting opera, and that he plans to continue as the music director of the Aspen Music Festival and School, a prestigious summer academy. Mr. Spano added that he had been particularly gratified by the way Atlanta audiences had embraced new music — and said that he had gone out of his way to play more than just one piece by the living composers he showcased; to play those pieces more than once; to record them; to play them on tours; and to play them at youth concerts.

Now, Mr. Spano said, Atlanta audiences want even more new music. "I get as many complaints for more Higdon," he said, "as I do for more Beethoven."

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
ajc.com

April 18, 2018

Robert Spano looks back on his years with the ASO

By Bo Emerson

Conductors of symphony orchestras are called “maestro,” and they rarely don horsehead masks and dance around the stage.

But these kinds of things happen at a Robert Spano concert, and did happen at a performance of “cloth/field,” which not only featured dancers spinning Spano’s piano in circles while he performed his original music, but also included Spano’s terpsichorean debut.

Spano credits his collaborator, Lauri Stallings, founder of the innovative dance troupe Glo, for drawing him off the podium and onto the dance floor. “She finds ways for those of us with no skill to be part of the pageantry,” he said modestly, in a recent interview.

our memory and in Spano’s. He recently reviewed his career as music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, which began in 2001 and will end with the 2020-21 season.

Spano, 56, spoke about his time in Atlanta during a conversation in the “conductor’s suite” at Symphony Hall.

Spano is not tall, but a substantial, midsized package of enthusiasm, with a merry laugh and an energetic gait. On this day, he's wearing a silky short-sleeved shirt and professorial horn-rimmed glasses.

The conductor's suite, a small, piano-equipped, windowless bunker, was, on this particular day, redolent of the solvents being used to seal the concrete floors of the nearby Alliance Theatre during its ongoing renovation.

So far, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra hasn't been able to enjoy the kind of expansion or radical renovation that have improved the facilities for its fellow Woodruff Arts Center tenants, the Alliance Theatre and the High Museum. (The High doubled its space in 2005; the transformation of the Alliance will be complete this fall.)

In 2006, the symphony floated plans for a new hall, but that idea was shelved after the financial crisis of 2008. Spano hints that a change is coming, in the form of a renovation that will transform the hall's acoustics from good to great. "It would be just as exciting as a new hall," he said.

"It's something that I think will happen eventually and the question is, how quickly? And I would imagine that we'll be able to make progress in that direction before I leave, but not finish it (while I'm still here)."

Such a project would be a fitting cap to Spano's Atlanta tenure, a time that has seen some grim low points and some exalted highs.

Spano was music director of the Brooklyn Philharmonic when he was chosen as Atlanta's designate in 2000, and for four years he led both ensembles before deciding to direct all his energies to Atlanta.

When he arrived, he quickly set about pursuing one of his signature achievements: the fostering of new music.

According to the ASO, Spano's orchestra has performed 28 ASO commissions; 13 ASO co-commissions; 49 world premieres and 32 Atlanta and U.S. premieres.

"When I came here, I heard from people — not in Atlanta, but elsewhere — saying you can't do new music there," he said. "I was reading Tom Wolfe's 'A Man in Full' right when I was hired, and I remember him describing the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra as an institution that had to end every concert with 'Bolero' to make sure everybody was happy.

"But that hasn't been my experience at all," he said. "We did make a decision right when I came here to cultivate relationships with these American composers and at the same time to cultivate an audience for them. … It was a very simple kind of strategy: Play them more than once, let them speak to members of our community — so we did composer interviews every time we played them — put them on our touring (programs), put them on youth concerts, record them, play pieces that we didn't necessarily commission … and I think really that's what worked: cultivating real relationships with these composers."

The composers he championed — including Jennifer Higdon,Christopher Theofanidis,Michael Gandolfi and others — were tonal, tuneful, and influenced by pop or world music. And they had one other thing in common: Their music was being played here. So Spano came up with the audacious concept of calling them the Atlanta School of Composers (even though only one was from Atlanta).

Their work was unlike the 12-tone music of their teachers, and Spano recognized the change as a revolution. "It's a discernible shift aesthetically in the history of American music," he said.

“The recognition that they share these characteristics made me look back and recognize that this is a historic moment in American music. It’s like looking back and seeing the change from the Baroque to the Classical, from the Classical period to the Romantic period.

“It was never designed to create such a thing, per se. It was a recognition of what had been transpiring.”

Will the history books go along with the idea? Time will tell.

Spano can also be proud of progress since 2014, when the musicians in the orchestra were locked out for the second time in two years over salary disputes. The orchestra was in debt, its membership reduced and relations with management were rancorous.

Since then, the orchestra’s complement has been replenished, the community has endowed new positions and the ASO has steadily finished with a budget surplus.

He has also taken the orchestra on some creative multimedia adventures. An upcoming performance of Leonard Bernstein’s “Candide” will include actors from the Alliance, puppets and projections.

Spano says he doesn’t know where his plans will take him after he leaves the ASO. “It’s my family. It’s my musical life,” he said. “The thought of not being here is unimaginable. But at the moment, knowing I’m leaving in three years puts in relief just how grateful I am to be doing what I’m doing here.”

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
ajc.com

June 22, 2017

ASO music director releases recording of his own music

By Andrew Alexander

Some musicians love to compose new music. For better or worse, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Music Director Robert Spano says he's not that sort of musician.

"I always find it really daunting and challenging and nauseating," he says of the composing process. "I think it's because, as a performer, every moment you look to the next thing. You just have to keep putting it out there, and you can't second-guess yourself. When you're composing, it's the opposite. Everything you do is subject to scrutiny and examination … I find that process very painful."

Nonetheless, the conductor, best known to Atlantans for his work behind the podium, has just released a recording of his own music on the orchestra's label, ASO Media. The recording encompasses two of Spano's piano works that he performs himself: "Hölderlin-Lieder," settings of three poems by early Romantic German poet Friedrich Hölderlin recorded

with soprano Jessica Rivera performing the text, and “Sonata: Four Elements,” a piano work in four movements based on the symbolic elements of the ancient Greeks: earth, air, water and fire.

Composing may not always be the most pleasant process, Spano says, but getting the music in his mind down onto paper is crucial. “There’s a sense that there’s something there you want to capture,” he says. “There’s something in the air that’s asking to be born, and you want to be sure that it’s cared for in its most pristine and pure state. As you whittle away and work and change it, you get closer and closer to the sense of ‘That’s it, that’s it!’” in the early 1990s when he was teaching at Oberlin. “I was just enraptured,” he says of his first encounter with the work, which he happened upon in a bilingual translation in a bookstore. “It’s not just the beauty of the poetic language, it’s his sublime ideas. … That history of philosophy intersecting with poetry is especially beautiful to me.’”

He says that he began setting a few poems to music back then, but other responsibilities forced him to put the project aside. It wasn’t until the recent past he thought to pick it back up again. In 2012, a residency at the Hermitage Artist Retreat in the Sarasota, Fla., area gave him the rare opportunity to devote significant time to focus on composing.

“I intended to write the piano music that’s on the CD,” he says. “The day I was going to leave, those two songs were sitting on the piano. I thought, ‘Those would be really good for Jessica Rivera. I should really finish what I started.’ I didn’t tell her about the idea then. I just thought, ‘I’ll take it with me, maybe on the side I’ll do some fooling around with this really old material.’”

The songs turned out to be a preoccupation during his residency, and with Rivera in mind as his muse, he was able to complete the series of songs.

“There’s a challenge in trying to describe her voice,” he says of the soprano, who has performed frequently with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. “It’s the richness and the warmth and the depth just in the sound itself that’s so mesmerizing. But it’s not just the quality of the voice, it’s also her sensitivity and intention. It’s her use of text, the way she connects with language. And her very refined sophisticated understanding of how things are unfolding musically, so it’s this marvelous combination of heart, mind and vocal cords that’s just incomparable. There’s something special about what she does that only she can do. I thought of her singing those songs. I knew I just had to write more.”

Spano and Rivera recorded the songs in the studio with longtime ASO Media producer Elaine Martone in the booth. Spano also recorded his solo work “Sonata: Four Elements,” a meditation on the elements and their symbolic meaning.

“Jung was very much on my mind,” he says. “No one element in this larger metaphysical sense is easy to pin down. They’re all multivalent, as any symbol is. … Certain physical aspects were also very much on my mind at different times. I would think of shafts of light on the water, or the way the waves rolled or the gurgling sounds that water makes, or the kind of refraction that crystals have.”

Overall, the project was so long in gestation and creation Spano says he’s still in disbelief the project is now complete. “I’m still rubbing my eyes,” he says. “It’s the result of things that came out of such different parts of my life and different places. When it’s finally done, it’s not even quite believable.”

As for what’s ahead now that the recording is a reality, Spano says he’s working on setting some poems by German poet Rainer Maria Rilke for mezzo-soprano Kelley O’Connor, and he’s also creating a violin sonata specifically for ASO Concertmaster David Coucheron based on an

infamously challenging Baroque piece called the “Devil’s Trill.”

“It is a phoenix-like experience,” Spano says of the recent path of the orchestra, which managed to survive a difficult labor battle marked by a devastating lockout in 2014. “Even though it’s been a couple years now, it’s a coming out of the ashes. We have a new executive director, and soon we’ll have a new board chair, a new head of the Woodruff Arts Center. And there’s the incredible excitement with the influx of new musicians. In recent years — not all of it due to the strife, some of it has been natural attrition — there have been a lot of openings to fill. … There’s this whirlwind of activity. We have these new faces and new talents and new sounds. This is a whirlwind of change at every level of the organization. That’s exhilarating. Scary and exhilarating.”

The Boston Globe

January 2, 2014

By now, Spano and 'La Pasión' are well acquainted

By David Weininger

The 2001 US premiere of Osvaldo Golijov's "La Pasión según San Marcos" was led by Robert Spano, who returns with it to Symphony Hall.

Thirteen years ago this month, conductor Robert Spano was in Seattle, conducting Britten's "Billy Budd" at that city's opera company. But he had on his mind a new work by Osvaldo Golijov, an Argentine-born Boston-based composer who was about to begin what would become a rapid career ascent.

The new piece, "La Pasión según San Marcos," was a polyglot, revolutionary setting of the Passion story from the Gospel of Mark that incorporated dance and African and Latin American musical traditions. Spano was to conduct its US premiere, with members of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. It was one of four Passion settings commissioned for the 250th anniversary of Bach's death and had been premiered in Germany in November 2000. Spano was a new music enthusiast, and he had the score and a video of that performance.

Nevertheless, getting inside the piece was a major challenge.

"Honestly, it was like entering a new world," Spano said recently from his home in the mountains of northern Georgia. "I had to figure out how to conduct it, and I felt like I was learning a new language." Many of the performers he would soon work with in Boston had played in the premiere; Spano went into the first rehearsal and asked, "What do you need?" It was a way of working himself into Golijov's musical and theatrical vision.

"I mean, the continuo group being Cuban drummers kind of changed things for me," he said, laughing at the understatement.

Spano, 52, a former BSO assistant conductor who has been music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra since 2001, returns to Boston next week for three more performances of "La Pasión según San Marcos," which almost singlehandedly made Golijov's reputation. Ecstatic ovations greeted those first concerts, and Spano said that the piece has lost none of its intensity in the intervening years.

That enduring vitality has several sources, he explained, one of which is the work's visual flamboyance. Another is the Apostle Mark's telling of the Passion, what Spano called its "from-the-street, on-the-scene character. I think [Golijov] really captured that sense of immediacy in the drama."

And finally there is the music, a carnivalesque mix of dance, folk, pop, and Western classical styles. "All of these things in one goulash — it's almost inexplicable," Spano said. Perhaps the most surprising thing about the "Pasión" is how successfully Golijov avoids any sense of kitsch by not trying to incorporate one genre ("Latin American") into another ("classical").

"He doesn't manipulate those styles," said the conductor. "They're just there, as what they are."

Golijov is one of a handful of composers Spano began to work closely with when he came to Atlanta. What began as an effort to tap into American music of his generation has become a full-fledged brand: Those composers — Golijov, Christopher Theofanidis, Jennifer Higdon, and Michael Gandolfi chief among them — have been quasi-officially dubbed "The Atlanta School" for their deep and ongoing relationship to the orchestra.

"Somewhere along the line, probably about five years into my being here, I realized that these composers are all so different from one another, but they do share some commonalities," Spano said. Those common traits include tonal writing and the influence of pop and world music. "It's a striking and observational shift, aesthetically, from our teachers."

So successful has the project been that it's easy to forget that Atlanta was no hotbed of new music when Spano arrived. When he moved from New York to Atlanta in 2000 — he spent one season as music director designate — he was reading Tom Wolfe's "A Man in Full," set in Atlanta. "He described the symphony at one point as a place where they had to play 'Bolero' every night to make sure the audience was happy.

"I think one of the things that made it work here was a deliberate and tactical approach," he continued. "I think I did one piece by a living American composer my first year here. And so we moved slowly and we moved in such a way as to make sure we were building a family for the experience as well."

Now in its 13th official year, the Spano-Atlanta partnership is one of the longest and most successful among US orchestras. When he took the job, there was talk of it being a steppingstone to a

higher-profile ensemble, but he seems almost inordinately happy there.

“It’s home now,” he said, “a musical home and an artistic home and a personal home. It was probably about five or six years in that I stopped feeling like I was conducting the Atlanta Symphony, and that we together were the Atlanta Symphony. There’s something that happens over time where there’s a mutual understanding — it makes digging musically deeper happen more quickly. Because we don’t start from square one; we start from years of experience and musical expectations of one another. And it’s heaven.”

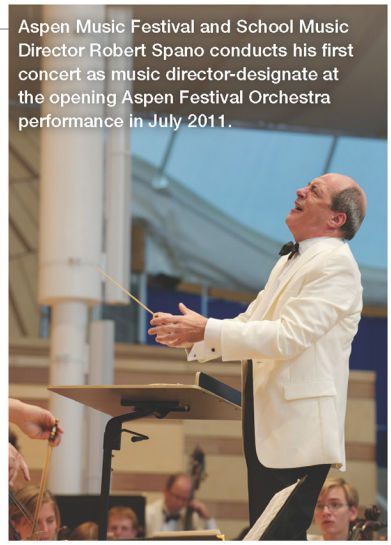
Asked how long he saw himself staying in Atlanta, Spano laughed and said, “Oh, I’d love another 10 years if I can swing it.” He is mindful, though, that change and fresh ideas are essential for any organization, quoting a famous line from Proverbs: “Where there is no vision, the people perish.”

“I’ve tried to be very sensitive and aware of how we’re doing in that arena. Are we still moving forward? Is there real vision? But I still feel very strongly that we’re riding a wonderful wave, and as long as that keeps going, I’m very happy to be here.”

Robert Spano
SYMPHONY
CODA
Spring 2013

The Art of Listening

Last summer, conductor **Robert Spano** became music director of the Aspen Music Festival and School—fundamentally an educational institution. That's in addition to his work as music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. What does it take to connect the concert hall and the conservatory?



Aspen Music Festival and School Music Director Robert Spano conducts his first concert as music director-designate at the opening Aspen Festival Orchestra performance in July 2011.

All photos this page: Alex Iwin

To join the Aspen Music Festival and School and its many communities at this particular time is an honor and a great challenge. At the heart of the Festival is the School, and in our work today as musicians, education is of paramount importance. For all of us who love the rich tradition of what we colloquially call classical music, we currently face seismic shifts in how we fund, present, promote, nurture, and sustain this precious art.

The concert experience as we know it has flourished for a mere few hundred years, and for it to continue to thrive will require us to be creatively adaptive in transformational ways. But let's remember that "tradition" and "traitor" have the same Latin root. Therein lies a warning: while undergoing necessary transformation, let us not betray the essence of our tradition.

At the core of our tradition is active listening. Active listening is the magical thread that binds composer, performer, and audience. Our capacity to pay attention to sound as it unveils its meaning through time is a precious art, one distinguished from other, no less "musical" experiences such as trance-inducing chant, elevator music, or disco.

The expression "pay attention" is the key. Appreciation of a Mahler symphony requires an investment on the part of the listener—an active engagement, an extension outside of oneself. Attentive listening is a payment that reaps rich rewards.

The art of listening is the core of the tradition we must pass on to the next generation. The ramifications of cultivating that human capacity could have far-reaching positive impact in many arenas—social, political, religious.

At the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra we continually face the challenges of revitalizing and connecting great music to a great city. The brilliant musicians onstage and many wise colleagues with whom I've shared my twelve years there have taught me much of what I want to bring to Aspen. The extraordinary faculty at Aspen brings tremendous wealth of experience and expertise as well as a desire to pass it on. Aspen provides a unique, intensive, and potentially transformative experience for its students.

Robert Spano works with Lee Mills, a student at Aspen's American Academy of Conducting.

Spano and Yoheved Kaplinsky (left) study a score with 2012 American Academy of Conducting student Gevorg Gharabekyan.

From within the woodwind section, Spano observes a student conductor at the American Academy of Conducting.

In turn, if we as teachers and mentors listen attentively to our students, we may find their perspective informs us as we face the challenges of perpetuating our great tradition. Aspen is the ideal laboratory for finding our path to the future. S

The Aspen Music Festival and School brings more than 600 students together every summer to study privately with eminent pedagogues and perform in the festival with professional classical artists.

Robert Spano

GRAMOPHONE
THE CLASSICAL MUSIC MAGAZINE

November 17, 2011

Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Launches Own Label

Performing Michael Gandolfi's new work

The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, best known for its recordings for Telarc, has announced plans for its own label. The first recording on ASO Media – which is due for release on February 22 as both a CD and a download – will be conducted by the ASO's music director, Robert Spano. The featured composers both have strong relationships with the orchestra. Jennifer Higdon's new concerto, *On a Wire* – for which the orchestra is joined by eighth blackbird – will be twinned on the recording with Michael Gandolfi's choral work *QED: Engaging Richard Feynman* in which the ASO is supported by its Chorus.

Both works are commissions by the ASO and both composers are members of the Atlanta School of Composers, an initiative by Spano and the orchestra to "nurture and champion contemporary music through multi-year partnerships with a new generation of American composers". Another member of the School is the Masterprize-winning Christopher Theofanidis whose Symphony has also been recorded, and which will also be released next year. A disc of Rachmaninov, with pianist Garrick Ohlsson joining the ASO, is scheduled for next autumn.

In the control room: Jennifer Higdon, Robert Spano and Elaine Martone

The production team, well known to Telarc aficionados, comprises Elaine Martone and Michael Bishop. The other partnership announced will see Naxos of America distributing the ASO Media releases both physically and digitally.

Robert Spano

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

June 1, 2010

New Music With a Tonal Twist

By Barbara Jepson

All too often, music commissioned by symphony orchestras is as ephemeral as a shooting star, lighting up a concert program and quickly vanishing from view. Compare that to the rollout given "City Scape" by American composer Jennifer Higdon. After its premiere by Robert Spano and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra in 2002, "City Scape" was performed on tour, recorded for Telarc and reprised in later concert seasons.

Rehearsing a movement of the piece a few years ago, Mr. Spano had a kind of epiphany: "We played it through once," he recounted over coffee in his studio in the Memorial Arts Building at the Woodruff Arts Center. "It felt like we were coming back to a Beethoven symphony. It was repertoire."

The Ohio-born conductor has led the ASO in an impressive 55 works by 33 living composers since taking the helm as music director in 2001. But he is particularly known for his espousal of a cadre of primarily American composers dubbed the "Atlanta School." They are Ms.

Higdon (this year's Pulitzer Prize winner), Michael Gandolfi, Osvaldo Golijov and Christopher Theofanidis. The addition of a fifth composer to the group, 29-year-old Adam Schoenberg, will soon be announced. Over the next few seasons, the ASO will premiere two of Mr. Schoenberg's works, one of which will be recorded.

Beginning June 3 here, Mr. Spano leads the latest Atlanta School creations—two world premieres on the same program. "QED: Engaging Richard Feynman" by Mr. Gandolfi was inspired by discoveries of the Nobel Prize winning physicist; it utilizes the famed ASO Chorus, which came to prominence under the late Robert Shaw. "On a Wire," a concerto for sextet and orchestra by Ms. Higdon, features the crack new-music ensemble Eighth Blackbird.

Although the Atlanta School nickname originally referred to the orchestra's involvement—Ms. Higdon is the only one of the composers who has ever lived here—these composers share certain aesthetic traits. "There is a primacy of melody in their music," said Mr. Spano, a broad-shouldered man who wears Harry Potter glasses. "All of them are interested in world music, popular music, or both. Jennifer and Osvaldo studied with George Crumb. . . . And they are quite different from the generations before them, who were more influenced by atonal systems of composition." Most important, their music moves him. "On the level of grief and catharsis, of joy, suffering or excitement," he declared, "I find their emotional message is vivid."

Melody? Catharsis? In more doctrinaire decades, writing music with such features constituted professional suicide. Today, an increasing number of composers utilize tonality, weaving melodic lines, dissonant riffs, electronic effects and ethnic or pop influences into a compelling 21st-century fabric. But tonal music still elicits disdain from diehard modernists. Mr. Spano chalks it up to elitism—"If people like it, it can't be that good."

The most significant aspect of the Atlanta School project may be the trust it is building for new music in general. A semistaged version of the opera "Dr. Atomic" by American composer John Adams sold at 88% of paid capacity during the depths of the economic recession. In a reversal of usual box-office patterns, concerts with music by Atlanta School composers typically sell at about 84% of capacity, says marketing vice president Charles Wade, versus an average of 78% for other classical events.

Mr. Spano, 49, has proved a good fit for the ASO on many levels. His recordings with the 65-year-old orchestra have brought increased attention, garnering six Grammy Awards. His facility with choral masterpieces like the Berlioz Requiem ("Best Choral Performance, 2005) or the less frequently encountered "A Sea Symphony" by Ralph Vaughan Williams (three Grammys) has showcased the chorus. Atlanta critics say the orchestra has developed more stylistic flexibility and communicative power—the latter, a result of Mr. Spano encouraging increased individual expression from the players. Another example of his collaborative approach: He recently gave orchestra members more say than contractually required in the selection of a new concertmaster. "He has an incredible sense of rhythm, a high degree of clarity with the [baton]," said ASO principal trumpet Thomas Hooten, one of 18

players hired under Mr. Spano's aegis. "He brings a lot of drama and passion to the music."

Despite these successes, the ASO suffers from financial challenges and the ungrateful acoustics of its primary concert venue in the Memorial Arts Building. Plans for an ambitious new facility by starchitect Santiago Calatrava were shelved for funding reasons. A projected $3.5 million deficit for fiscal 2010 has forestalled a more modest building near the present hall. (The orchestra's current annual budget is $45.6 million.) But that hasn't stopped Mr. Spano and principal guest conductor Donald Runnicles from experimenting with projected images and other innovative theatrical approaches.

Mr. Spano grew up in Elkhart, Ind., a center of wind- and brass-instrument manufacturing, the third generation in a family of musicians. He studied piano, flute and violin intensively as a child and later took up the French horn, viola and double bass with varying degrees of success. At 15, the multitalented teenager won a composing competition.

After studies at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music and the Curtis Institute of Music, Mr. Spano became assistant conductor to Seiji Ozawa at the Boston Symphony Orchestra. He was music director of the Brooklyn Philharmonic from 1996 to 2004, where he furthered its tradition of innovative repertoire. Guest conducting stints have included the U.S. premiere of Mr. Golijov's groundbreaking "St. Mark Passion" at the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the first performance of Kaija Saariaho's "La Passion de Simone" in the United Kingdom, with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. More recently, the conductor led his second "Ring" cycle at the Seattle Opera.

Following an evocative performance of Verdi's "Requiem" here in April, Mr. Spano ducked out for a cigarette before joining colleagues crowding his modest studio in a celebratory drink. A cut-glass punch bowl filled with ice was waiting to soothe the tendinitis he developed after practicing the piano nine hours a day for three chamber concerts at nearby Emory University, where he has begun a three-year, three-week residency as guest lecturer and performer. (He was unable to play in the first two concerts.) "It was an Icarus moment," the conductor said jocularly the next morning. A voracious reader, he lives alone in a book-lined loft near the Woodruff campus, escaping when possible to a country home in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Next season marks the 10th anniversary of Mr. Spano's music directorship at the ASO and of the Atlanta School program. "I think the most important thing I've done in my life, period," he said, "is to be part of nurturing a culture for new music."

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
ajc.com

July 27, 2012

Sugarland, Robert Spano among Georgia Music Hall of Fame inductees

By Melissa Ruggieri

Sugarland's Jennifer Nettles and **Kristian Bush**, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Music Director **Robert Spano** and Southern rockers **.38 Special** are among the upcoming inductees to the Georgia Music Hall of Fame.

The 34th annual awards show will take place at 5 p.m. Oct.14 at Cobb Energy Performing Arts Centre and broadcast live on Georgia Public Broadcasting.

In addition to the aforementioned newbies, who will receive, respectively, the "Performer," "Chairman Award" and "Group" distinction, the other inductees are:

Alex Hodges ("Non-Performer), CEO of Nederlander concerts.
Gary Rossington ("Songwriter"), founding member/guitarist of Lynyrd Skynyrd.
Riley Biederer ("Horizon Award"), 15-year-old singer-songwriter from Atlanta.

Posthumous awards will also be bestowed upon blues guitarist **Johnny Jenkins**, Fox Theatre organist and WSB personality **Bob Van Camp** and DJ **Skinny Bobby Harper**.

Performances are expected from former "American Idol" runner-up Diana DeGarmo (a Snellville, Ga., native) and her fiancée Ace Young, also an "Idol" vet, as well as showings from many of the inductees.

Just-retired TV icon Monica Pearson will serve as mistress of ceremonies.
Tickets for the show start at $60 ($20 for students) and go on sale Aug. 4 through Ticketmasteroutlets. Visit www.cobbenergycentre.com for more details.

Robert Spano

SEATTLE METROPOLITAN

August 2009

On the Town

Ring Leader

Conductor Robert Spano returns for another workout with Wagner's Ring Cycle.

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AUDIENCES FROM AROUND the globe will pack McCaw Hall this month after waiting four years for the return of *The Ring*, Seattle Opera's signature Wagner production. Robert Spano, the internationally acclaimed music director of the Atlanta Symphony, gives over his entire summer here to prepare and lead three rounds of the mighty four-opera, 16-hour cycle. Yet he once counted himself among the uninitiated who wondered what all the fuss was about. "I was a real Wagner hater," he confesses. "Everything about him put me off, the nasty personality and social behavior. But musically, too, I found certain things unappealing. Before I really knew the music, it seemed so full of excess—like repeating the theme that represents the ring *13 times* in one scene change!"

This staging of _ The Ring_, dubbed "green" for its spectacular design drawing on the natural splendor of the Northwest, was unveiled in Seattle in the summer of 2001. The director, Stephen Wadsworth, brought a compelling focus to the character relationships, but the production lacked a correspondingly strong personality in the orchestra pit. Spano surprised himself when he accepted Seattle Opera general director Speight Jenkins's invitation to serve as the 2005 *Ring* maestro: To conduct a single Wagner score for the first time is demanding enough; it's a walk compared to the triathlon feat of a *Ring* debut. All of the piece's dimensions are gigantic. Long before George Lucas or J. R. R. Tolkien, Wagner grasped the enormous pull of fantastic mythological narratives. His cycle, nearly three decades in the making, includes a sizeable cast of over 30 distinct characters, not counting extras. Because some of the lead singers need "intermission" days to rest their -voices, a presentation of all four operas lasts close to a week.

"Even physical demands are part of the scope of *The Ring*," says spano. "Wagner is that big."

Spano hadn't even *seen* a production of *The Ring*. But, after six months of internal debate and a preliminary study, he reconsidered his wholesale dismissal of Wagner. Once he accepted the post as *Ring* leader, he spent another two years in close scrutiny of the material. "This was all new water to me," he recalls. "I had no idea how it was going to turn out. Once I started exploring this world in depth it became all-consuming. It was a complete reversal. Of course we had all learned in music classes about Wagner's influence, but suddenly *I got it*." As an example he cited the famous monologue in Act II of *Die Walküre*, in which Wotan, the king of the gods, explains the ring's curse to his daughter. "I was one of those people who couldn't sit through it. But I realized it's the most perfect scene in the whole *Ring*, not a wasted note."

After glowing reviews for his 2005 debut, it was a given that Spano would return for the current revival. Rehearsing here since early June, he refers to the "kinetic memory" he

summons from those first encounters. “Even physical demands are part of the scope of the project,” he says. “Wagner is that big.” He prepares like an athlete in training. Cigarettes are verboten. Pilates and a carefully rationed diet help him shepherd energy.

This time, he coaches a dramatically altered cast, including, in her first Seattle Brünnhilde, Janice Baird, who brought thrilling intensity to the title role in last fall’s *Elektra*. But any challenges and complexities are part of the appeal for Spano—and for the opera’s rapt fans. A keen student of philosophy, Spano refers again to the big scene with Wotan: “It’s like Nietzsche’s idea of perspectivism—you can look at *The Ring* from the perspective of each character, and all of them have value. I wouldn’t give any of them up. It’s not about finding the truth of *The Ring*; it’s about finding the *truths*. That’s why we have Trekkies for Wagner!”


Bravo Robert!
Musical America 2008 CONDUCTOR OF THE YEAR
From our hearts,
the entire
Atlanta
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congratulates
Music Director
Robert Spano
whose vision and engaging leadership
has created Grammy-winning recordings,
inspired the Atlanta School of Composers,
led the Orchestra in America's
premier concert halls and festivals,
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Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus.
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Robert Spano

By Susan Elliott

Conductor of the Year

Vibrant, industrious, impassioned, inventive—prime qualities of one of America's brightest young conductors. His curiosity into musical trends knows no bounds: Among the composers whose works he has introduced to the world are John Adams, Osvaldo Golijov, Jennifer Higdon, David Del Tredici, and John Harbison.

In the last decade, Robert Spano has done more to blast through the conventional barriers of symphonic programming than possibly any American conductor working today. An intriguing combination of nervous energy, intellectual curiosity, and bone-deep musicality, Spano has been tilling the red-clay soil of Atlanta for the past six seasons, nurturing Osvaldo Golijov's muse, catapulting lesser-known composers into the limelight, and bringing an orchestra once known as the backup band to Robert Shaw's stunning chorus to a new level of fame and fortune.

The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra partnership has borne tremendous fruit on recordings—over half of them repertory premieres—including eight CDs on Telarc and two on Deutsche Grammophon for the label's Golijov project. But these are by no means Spano's only calling cards. He has guested with most of the major U.S. ensembles; last summer he made his BBC Proms debut in a program of Bernstein and Gershwin. His *Ring* cycle with the Seattle Opera in 2005 elicited major accolades, such that he's repeating it in 2009. This season he returns to the Chicago Lyric Opera to conduct the house premiere of John Adams's *Dr. Atomic* and takes *Ainadamar*, one of his Golijov signature works, to the Barbican Centre. He also makes return visits to the major orchestras of Birmingham, Philadelphia, and the Boston Symphony, his alma mater of slightly over a decade ago.

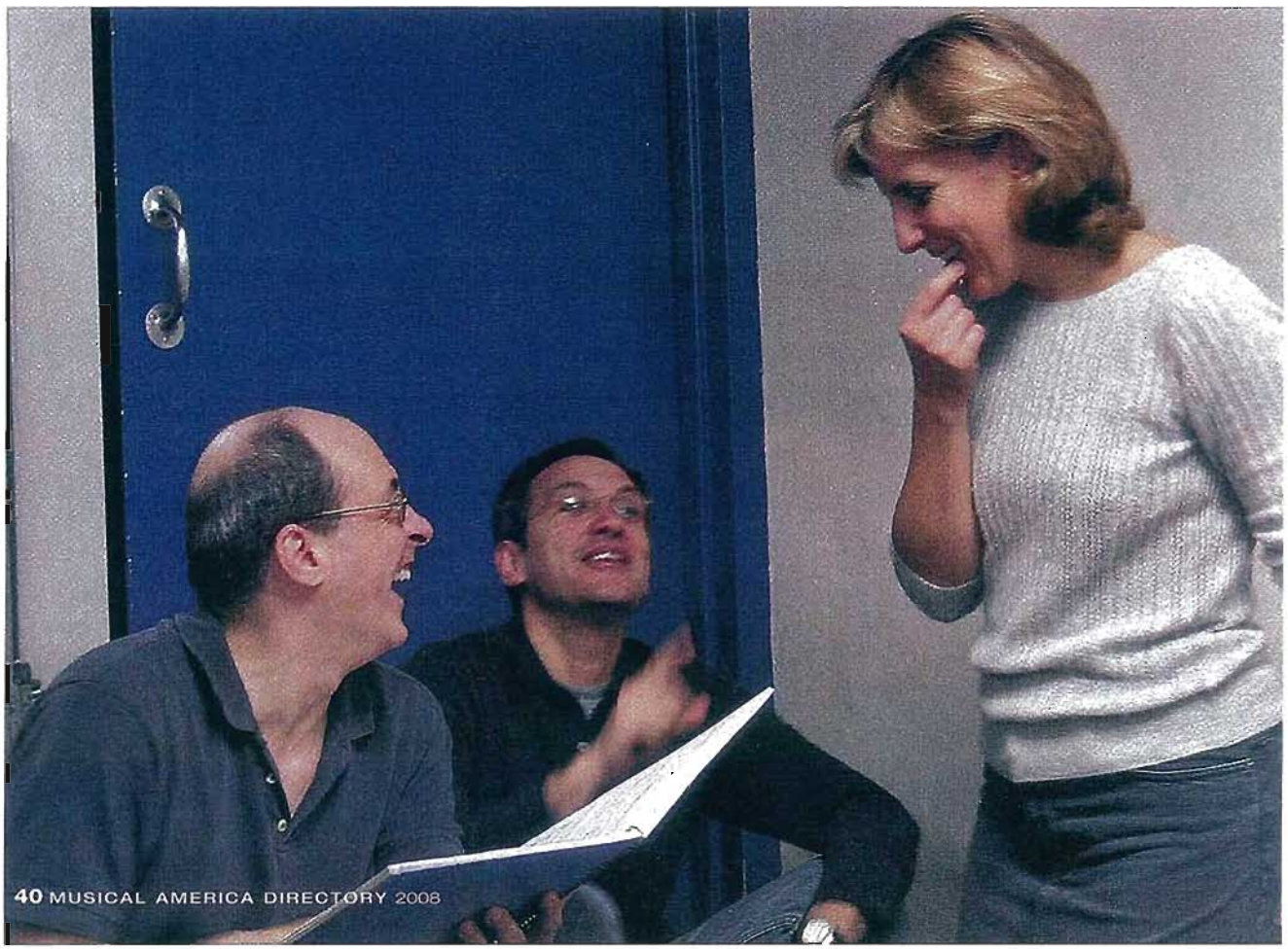
Along the way, he plans to get back to his initial raison d'être: composing. "In the same way that I needed to go to the Boston Symphony, I needed to commit to Brooklyn, I needed to commit to Atlanta and develop the relationship that I now treasure and enjoy. I know that the next thing for my health, my evolution, is to write music again. It was my whole identity as a child."

That goes a long way to explain his self-described "obsession" with new work. Sipping lemonade one steamy summer afternoon on the terrace of an under-the-radar watering hole behind his loft in midtown Atlanta, Spano describes composer-nurturing as "the biggest joy in my life." His energy is palpable and his enthusiasm contagious: He has commissioned or co-commissioned seven works in the last five years—Jennifer Higdon's *City Scape* (2002), John Corigliano's Violin Concerto (2003), Christopher Theofanidis's *The Here and Now* (2005), David Del Tredici's *Paul Revere's Ride* (2005), Michael Gandolfi's *The Garden of Cosmic Speculation* (2007), Richard Danielpour's *Pastime* (2007), and John Harbison's Concerto for Double Bass (2007). Five more are on the way, for future seasons.

Amid such repertory, a luminous Telarc CD of three peaceful works by Ralph Vaughan Williams with Atlanta last year—the *Tallis* Fantasy, Fifth Symphony, and *Serenade to Music*, with the brief, choral Tallis original as an introductory track—reminds us of the conductor's wide range of affinities.

Golijov, with whom Spano has been working for over a decade, calls the conductor "a shaman with a beat. Every time I give him a new piece, he understands it better than I

(left to right) Spano, Osvaldo Golijov, and Dawn Upshaw at DG's 2005 recording sessions for Golijov's Three Songs. Photo: © Carol Wyatt/DG.



do. Maybe it's telepathy, maybe because he's a composer too, but in the last ten years of working together, I can think of maybe one time when I've told him to go slower or faster. That's it. That's how tremendous the understanding is."

Says soprano Dawn Upshaw, another frequent collaborator: "From the first moment I met Bob—I think it was at the Tanglewood Music Festival—it was so clear that this was an extraordinarily vibrant young man who, above all else, loved and lived music with such a passion, nothing was going to get in his way of sharing that love with all those he came into contact.

"I think Bob is a musical 'channeler.' And the actual moment of performance? It's as if we're dancing together! I don't even sense who's 'leading,' but he's one of the best dancing partners I've ever had!"

Unlike such colleagues as James Conlon or Dennis Russell Davies, the Ohio-born Spano, 46, has managed to develop his career almost entirely Stateside. After writing 12-tone pieces in high school, he studied conducting at Oberlin with Robert Baustian and later at the Curtis Institute, under Max Rudolf. It was Rudolf who may have had the biggest impact, for when asked what makes a great conductor, Spano quotes his teacher: "The most important trait for a conductor to have is curiosity."

Spano's is insatiable.

His early career path was strictly academic: Bowling Green University, where he headed up the orchestra and opera programs; Oberlin Conservatory, as music director of the Opera Theater. (He remains on the Oberlin faculty.) His first podium job outside the academy was as assistant conductor of the Boston Symphony under Seiji Ozawa, a three-year assignment that started in the summer of 1991 at Tanglewood, to which he has returned every summer since in an array of guises, including head of the Conducting Institute and director of the Festival of Contemporary Music. Not bad for a guy who claims to have been rejected from the place as a student.

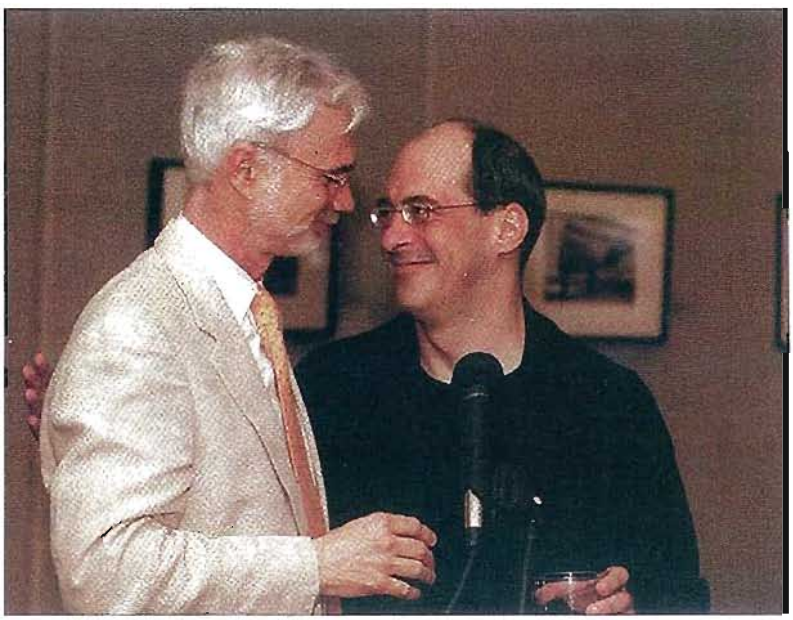
Spano credits Ozawa's "generous" advice with jump-starting his career. He describes preparing for what he calls "a 911"—last-minute conducting gig—in Toronto, when he was to lead Richard Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben* for the first time. Ozawa, he says, saved his skin ("He was extraordinary"). He also put Spano's keyboard facility to use for soloist rehearsals. And when the young conductor made his official podium debut on a BSO subscription concert, Ozawa was in the audience, ready to give him "notes."

"He was very perceptive," remembers Spano. "Like laser surgery."

After Boston came three years of non-stop guest conducting, and then the Brooklyn Philharmonic beckoned.

With the New York critics cheering him on, Spano managed in seven seasons (1996-2003) to put the part-time BPO on the national map, largely through inventive programming: While the New York Philharmonic was plowing through another Brahms Second or Tchaikovsky Sixth, Spano and the BPO were combining Conlon Nancarrow, Toru Takemitsu, and Astor Piazzolla on one program, introducing rock singer Marianne Faithfull to Kurt Weill songs on another, and offering such themed seasons as "The Healing Power of Music," with a premiere by John Mackey at one end of the spectrum and Mozart's *Così fan tutte* at the other. He also presided over the world premiere of Adams's *The Death of Klinghoffer*, in 2003.

At the time of his arrival in Atlanta for the 2001-02 season



(above) With composer John Adams, whose controversial opera *Death of Klinghoffer* he premiered in 2003.

Photo courtesy Atlanta Symphony Orchestra.

(left) Taking a bow with cellist Yo-Yo Ma at a Boston Symphony concert in 1992, during his three-year stint as assistant conductor of the orchestra

Photo: Miro Vitinov/Boston Symphony Orchestra.

(above) Spano leads the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, and soloists Christine Goerke, soprano, and Brett Polegato, baritone, in Ralph Vaughan Williams's mighty *A Sea Symphony*, which was later recorded by Telarc. Photo: © J.D. Scott/Atlanta Symphony Orchestra.

(simultaneous with that of Donald Runnicles as principal guest conductor, a post he still holds), the orchestra was at a low ebb, having long lost the Shaw luster and spirit during Yoel Levi's 12-year reign.

Six seasons later, the ASO is a different organization—across all levels. "He seems genuinely excited about being here, about being with *us*," says Christopher Rex, principal cello since the Shaw days.

"I know this orchestra better than any other in the world," says Spano. "We understand each other—not just for facility and speed, but in the depth and level of communication."

The honeymoon continues. Spano took the orchestra and chorus with him to the Ojai (California) Festival in 2006 and, for the third time, takes it to Carnegie Hall in the spring. "He's brought so many projects to the orchestra," continues Rex, "we feel like we're current, that the music we're making is *relevant*."

Which is Spano's gift—to make that connection between what he so passionately believes in, and what the rest of us need to hear. ◆

Susan Elliott is a journalist and editor of MusicalAmerica.com.

PREVIEW MAJOR ROBERT SPANO PERFORMANCES IN 2008

JANUARY
5, 9, 12, 15, 19 Civic Opera House, Chicago
Lyric Opera of Chicago; Gerald Finley, baritone; Eric Owens, bass-baritone; Jessica Rivera, soprano
Adams: Dr. Atomic (Midwest premiere)

FEBRUARY
28, 29, 3/1 Kimmel Center, Philadelphia
Philadelphia Orchestra
Stravinsky: Dumbarton Oaks
Stravinsky: Capriccio (Peter Serkin)
Mozart: Concert-Rondo, K. 382 (Serkin)
Rachmaninoff: Symphony No. 1

MARCH
27, 28, 29 Woodruff Center, Atlanta
30 Lucas Theatre, Savannah
4/5 Carnegie Hall, New York
Atlanta Symphony; Hila Plitmann, soprano; Rick Clement, tenor; Nathan Gunn, baritone
Sibelius: Tapiola
Theofanidis: Here and Now
Ravel: Daphnis et Chloé (complete)

APRIL
10 Symphony Hall, Birmingham
13 Barbican Centre, London
City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra
Dawn Upshaw, Jessica Rivera, sopranos; Kelley O'Connor, alto; Jesús Montoya, vocalist
Golijov: Ainadamar

JUNE
5, 7, 8 Woodruff Center, Atlanta
Atlanta Symphony Orchestra
Bach: Brandenberg Concerto No. 5 (Jean-Yves Thibaudet)
Ranjbaran: Piano Concerto (Thibaudet)
Rachmaninoff: Symphony No. 3
19 Woodruff Center, Atlanta
Atlanta Symphony Orchestra
National Black Arts Festival
Marsalis: New work (world premiere)

NOVEMBER
6, 7 Woodruff Center, Atlanta
Atlanta Symphony Orchestra
Marsalis: New work
Barber: Violin Concerto (Joshua Bell)
Bartók: Concerto for Orchestra

DECEMBER
7 Carnegie Hall, New York
Orchestra of St. Luke's; Dawn Upshaw, soprano; Kelley O'Connor, alto
Golijov: Ainadamar
12 Zankel Hall, New York
Zankel Band
Susan Graham, mezzo; Rod Gilfry, bass-baritone; Robert Spano, piano; pianist tba
Bernstein: Arias and Barcarolles
Bernstein: Trouble in Tahiti

PRICE
THE NEW YORKER
AUG. 21, 2006

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Dan Baum on the struggle to rebuild

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David Denby on 'World Trade Center'

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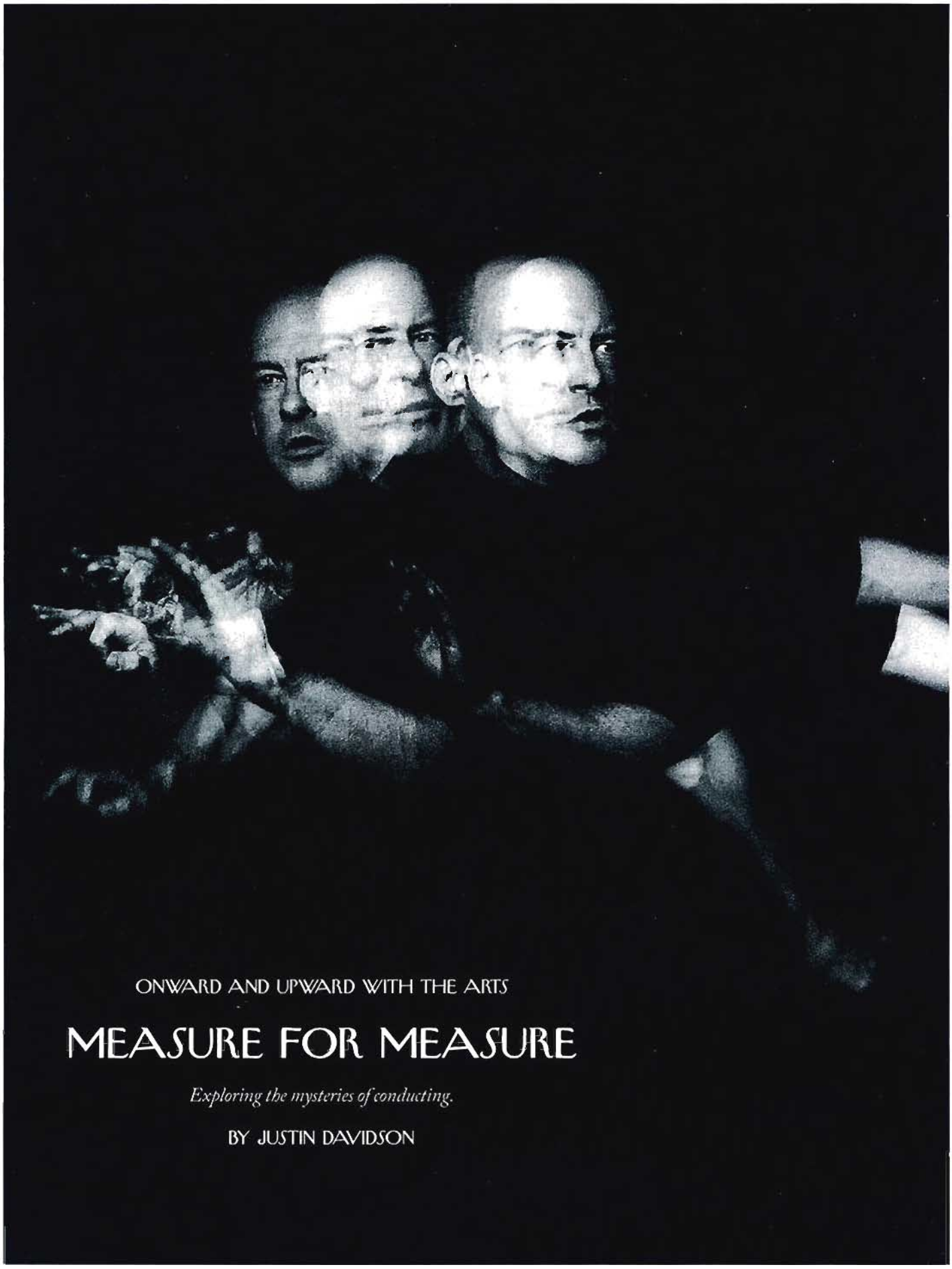
Plus: Christopher Buckley on Mel Gibson • Justin Davidson on the mystery of the maestro

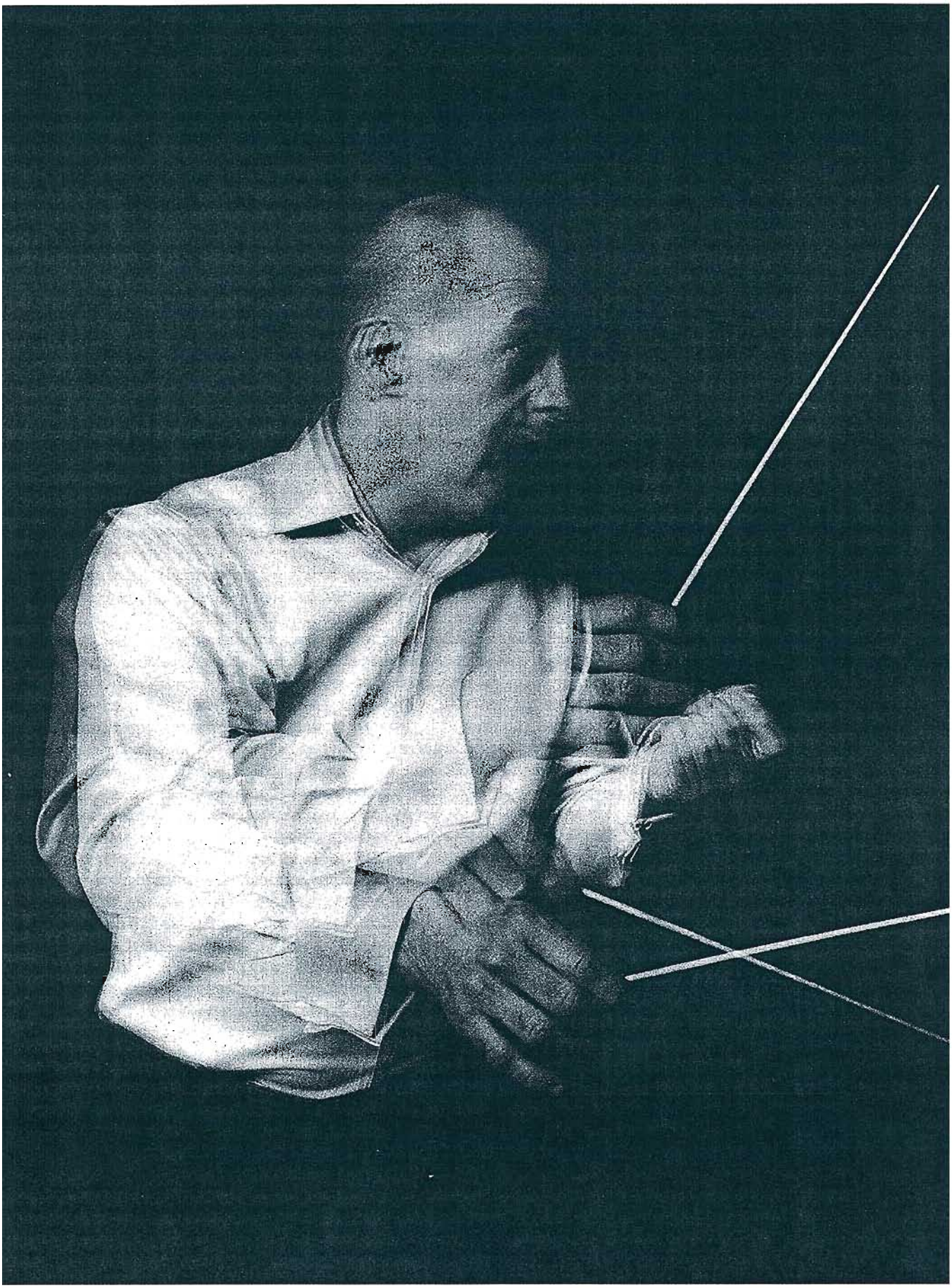


ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

MEASURE FOR MEASURE

Exploring the mysteries of conducting.

BY JUSTIN DAVIDSON



The American conductor Robert Spano raised his eyebrows and his baton, and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra dug into a smoky, "Bolero"-like dance. He was nearing the end of two tense and fatiguing days of recording a new opera, "Ainadamar," in the orchestra's concert hall, a half-buried concrete box. The base of his spine twitched to the beat, as if jolts of current were running through it. He grinned at the cellos, giving them a quick thumbs-up, and cued the trumpets by pretending to flick a cigarette butt at them.

When the music stopped, his body kept going. In the seconds before the next take, he accompanied his instructions to the players with a rapid series of gesticulations that even a musician sitting out of earshot could have understood. He made as if to squeeze an orange. (The message: "Give me a succulent tone.") He then mimed sliding a toy car down a ramp ("But don't drag; push right into the next beat"), whisking eggs ("Keep the sound vibrant"), and swatting a Ping-Pong ball ("Give the phrase a sharp, light bounce").

A white telephone next to his podium rang, and Spano listened as the opera's composer, Osvaldo Golijov, dictated some changes in the score. Golijov, along with a producer and a few engineers, was sitting in a windowless room backstage, linked to the auditorium by speakers and a TV monitor. "We've never done it that way before, but O.K.," Spano said amiably; a decade of working with Golijov has taught him that a new piece of his is not a fixed object. The conductor hung up and instantly translated Golijov's comments into a command. "A little more *schmeary*," he told the violins, dragging his open palm through the air, as if he were slathering a dozen bagels with cream cheese. When the red "Record" light, suspended above the orchestra, turned on, the dance instantly became more fluid, the melody sexier: less clop, more sway.

Spano is a small, perpetually quivering man of forty-five, with wire-rimmed glasses, a crescent of hair at the back of his head, and the searing gaze once cultivated by Weimar intellectuals. Spending time with him is both invigorating and exhausting. When he can bring himself to sit down, his leg bounces; his speech careers between erudition and profanity. "Fuck you very large" is one of his favorite expressions, and after using it he is apt to burst into hacking guffaws.

On the podium, Spano marshals this jerky urgency and uses it to kindle the orchestra. "Each conductor enters the music through some key technique," Bruce Kenney, a horn player, told me. "Some conductors are happy when we play together and in tune—precision comes first. Other conductors base their interpretation on the pacing, the tempo, and the energy. Other conductors want a particular sound. Robert's an energy guy."

I first met Spano a decade ago, after he had been appointed music director of the tottering Brooklyn Philharmonic and gave one performance after another in which rattling excitement overcame the often scrappy playing. I particularly relished a rough but light-filled performance of scenes from Olivier Messiaen's cathedral-like opera, "Saint François d'Assise."

When the recording of "Ainadamar" was finished, Spano, whose coiled alertness had never flagged, retreated to an underground suite with Golijov, the soprano Dawn Upshaw, and a crowd of singers, Latin percussionists, and orchestra administrators for some celebratory drinking. Spano poured himself shots of vodka and playfully toasted his colleagues. It took more than an hour for his adrenaline to ebb.

Even a merely competent conductor transmits a huge amount of musical information instantaneously, accurately, and virtually wordlessly. How quick or flexible the pulse should be, how biting a staccato, how distended a pause, how graceful a phrase, how heavy a march—one person with a stick channels this constant flow of minutiae to a hundred players, talking only sparingly in rehearsal and not at all in concert.

It's a mysterious mechanism that allows this to happen, a gestural form of communication that has no international semaphore. Each maestro has a personal dialect: what one conductor achieves with a minuscule vibration of a finger, another will accomplish with a sledgehammer swing of an arm. From the audience's point of view, the process looks wizardly. At eight o'clock on a Friday night, the maestro brandishes a wand and summons rich strains of music, brimming with passion and philosophy.

The conducting profession is less than two hundred years old. In the eighteenth century, violinists or harpsichordists often led the ensemble. In French opera, someone, frequently the composer, stood in the wings and noisily kept time by striking the stage with a staff. (In 1687, Jean-Baptiste Lully died after he impaled his foot while directing one of his compositions; the wound led to a fatal case of gangrene.) In the nineteenth century, the orchestra leader stopped producing any sound directly, and instead led by waving a rolled-up sheet of paper or a violin bow.

The German composer Ludwig Spohr claimed to have introduced the baton in 1820, and, in the ensuing decades, conductors transformed themselves from bandleaders into artists. Felix Mendelssohn's combination of musicianship and charisma turned him into one of the first celebrity interpreters. Hector Berlioz and Richard Wagner earned fame and money on the podium even though their compositions were deemed suspect. By the eighteen-eighties, the critic Eduard Hanslick was asserting that the best conductors controlled every note and inflection emanating from the musicians under their command. Hans von Bülow, he wrote, "conducts the orchestra as if it were a little bell in his hand."

At its most basic level, conducting an orchestra involves indicating how often the downbeat arrives, by tapping against the inner sides of an imaginary box. For a four-beat measure, the baton bounces down, left, right, up, and then down again, in an expansive sign of the cross. A three-beat measure resembles another benediction: down for the Father, right for the Son, up for the Holy Spirit.

Learning these movements is simple. But keeping time in a symphony is a

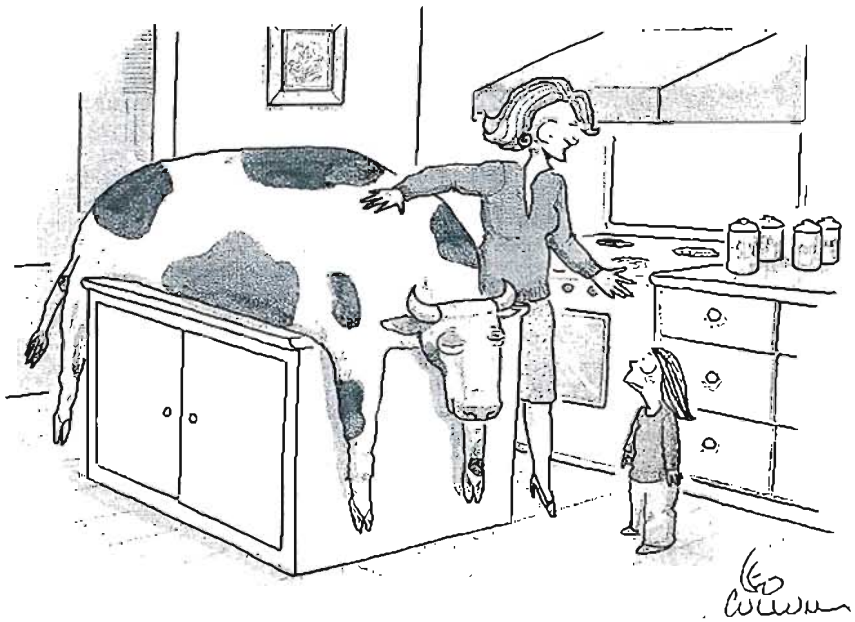
Robert Spano, the Atlanta Symphony's conductor, marshals a jerky urgency to enliven his players. Photographs by Steve Pyke.

complex matter; not even a steady four-four pulse is straightforward. In classical music, time behaves like a Slinky, stretching and compressing without ever losing its shape. Played too strictly, the most regular music would sound mechanical, but a tempo that is too fluid and personal feels chaotic and self-indulgent. A great conductor has a powerful internal sense of where each piece's natural limits are—at what point a slowing of the tempo will edge from the expansive into the grotesque, or how long a hesitation is needed before the gallop to the final cadence. When James Levine conducts Wagner at the Metropolitan Opera, he approaches the outer limits of slow. The effect, when it works, is like staying in the pause at the top of a swing, suspended between rapture and collapse. When it doesn't, it's like squelching through mud.

The deftly wielded baton also shapes the music's character—whether, for example, the strings should burrow into a deep Straussian shag or the winds give off a gelid Stravinskyan glint. The American composer and conductor Ingolf Dahl, who died in 1970, presented his students with a précis of stick technique: moving the hand up and down produces quick tempos and staccato articulation; moving it along a left-right axis will naturally slow the tempo and soften the accents; pushing out from the torso raises the volume; bringing the hands in toward the armpits will turn it down.

James Conlon, an American conductor who spent nine years as the principal conductor of the Paris Opéra, told me that a maestro's gestures fall into two groups, which might be described as "Get ready!" and "Go!" The "ready" gestures indicate an imminent event, such as a sudden acceleration, a surge in ferocity, or a harp glissando coming after many minutes without so much as a *plink*. A conductor clumsy enough to snap for an accented chord without preparing the orchestra is likely to get only a sloppy, hectic blurt.

Such attempts to systematize the gestures of conducting are rare, however. One of the standard textbooks, "The Grammar of Conducting: A Comprehensive Guide to Baton Technique and Interpretation," by the late Max Rudolf, downplays the physical aspects of the art. Rudolf offers the following instructions on the first bar of Weber's opera "Der Freischütz," in which the orchestra enters on a soft C and rumbles toward a forte on the same note, one octave higher: "If the forearm has sufficient intensity and the facial expression is convincing, you can indicate the crescendo . . . with small baton gestures, even without using the left hand."



"Mommy wants you to know where your food comes from."

The morning after the Atlanta recording session, Robert Spano led an easygoing rehearsal for an all-Beethoven concert, then drove me to lunch at the Colonnade, a roadside restaurant that he described as "a cross between a nursing home and a gay bar." As he ate soggy fried chicken and drank sweet iced tea, he looked as relaxed as he ever gets. That week, he had just two subscription concerts. In the decade before he joined the Atlanta Symphony, in 2001, he had no fixed address, travelling constantly between guest performances in Europe and the United States.

In a guest appearance, a maestro shows up for a first working session on a Tuesday morning, leads another rehearsal or two on Wednesday, and leaves Saturday night, right after the concert. The conductor must develop an instant rapport with his players, since musicians ignore messages they feel are wrong, irrelevant, or unclear. At that point, the conductor isn't conducting at all; he is a helpless bystander.

"When I was younger and I was conducting new orchestras all the time, I was terrified of screwing up," Spano said. "I went around with this constant sense of discomfort: Are they going to like me? Now it doesn't matter so much. Nobody's liked everywhere, and if I go to an orchestra and it doesn't work I just won't come back, and I'll go somewhere else."

A second category of conducting involves a relationship that takes shape and settles over time. A music director and his orchestra develop an old married couple's sensitivity to glances and signals. Several years ago, I watched Levine, who has spent most of his adult life at the Met, take his pit orchestra through a passage from Wagner's "Die Walküre." Levine sat on a bar stool in the Met's basement rehearsal room, grinning serenely and undemonstratively marking the beat. After several minutes, he stopped, flipped back a few pages, and said, "Horns, it should pop a little there." The same passage began again, only this time the whole orchestra—especially the strings—sounded bristling and febrile. Later, I asked him how he had managed to hinge a metamorphosis on one detail, and he replied that the only way to understand such a moment would be to

SOCIAL DIARY BY BRUCE McCALL

ON THE OCCASION OF THE MARRIAGE OF
DEAR LEADER KIM JONG IL AND MRS. KIM JONG IL

~

Program of Events

Shadowboxing Tournament, Pyongyang A.C.
(WINNER BY VIRTUAL KNOCKOUT: DEAR LEADER KIM JONG IL)

Test Firing of the Nuptial Nuclear Missile
"DAY OF UNMITIGATED JOY FOR EVEN THE REVANCHIST
JACKAL-HYENA HOOLIGAN STOOGE POSEURS"

Demolition Derby
GREAT LAWN OF THE KIM JONG IL PUTT-N-PLAY
(VICTOR: DEAR LEADER KIM JONG IL, 2006 BENTLEY ARNAGE)

Oat Champagne Reception, Palace of Bolts
CHAMPAGNE DONATED BY DEAR LEADER VINEYARD COLLECTIVE

Bridal Signing of Pre-Nup
WITNESSED BY DEAR LEADER KIM JONG IL
AND THE CHIEF OF INTELLIGENCE OF THE PEOPLE'S BETROTHAL POLICE

Exchange of Wedding Tirades
THE REVEREND KIM JONG IL OFFICIATING
(INCLUDES ATTEMPT TO BREAK GUINNESS BOOK OF WORLD RECORDS
MARK FOR LENGTH OF KIM JONG IL SPEECH, BY KIM JONG IL)

People's Court Emergency Loyalty Interrogation
MRS. KIM JONG IL, BEST MAN ,WEDDING-ORCHESTRA XYLOPHONIST, OTHERS
(ALL-HIGHEST MAGISTRATE KIM JONG IL, PRESIDING)

Wedding Feast, Dear Leader Kim Jong Il Bunker 23
(BRING YOUR OWN EATS!)

Bridal Rice Throw via Nuclear Test Missile
"VIGILANT SPIRIT OF THE RESOLUTE-BRIDESMAID PHALANX"

Wedding Party March-Past and Review
(UNARMED)

Bride and Groom Mount Getaway Tank
(HONEYMOON OFFICIALLY COMMENCES)

~

All Back to Work!

know his thirty-year history with the group, examine the way newer members interacted with veterans, and grasp the relationship between that passage and every other score the orchestra had recently been playing.

When I recounted the incident to Spano, he nodded. Levine's comment to the horns, he said, was less important than the underlying message: *Watch me here.* "People communicate much more by facial expressions and body language than with words," Spano said. "When you first meet someone, how is it that you know almost instantly whether you like that person or not? It's about the face. So is conducting. I can communicate an immense amount about how I feel about this music just by looking at the musicians. I can command their attention by paying attention to them. And then I don't have to do very much. If I want one person to play one note louder, all I have to do is look at him and do this"—he stared at me and crooked his finger in a tiny, summoning motion.

He went on, "You have to use the gesture that will elicit the right response, not the gesture that shows what the music sounds like. For example, if I'm doing Beethoven's Third Symphony, after the first two big chords the violins and violas start their engines while the cellos have a rather homespun tune. If I start conducting the cello melody, then the *dugga-dugga* of the violins and violas is going to be a mess. If I just keep a sharp, clear beat going, the violins and violas will stay together and the cellos will take care of themselves." Once a pattern is set, the conductor can ease off until it changes, like a driver on cruise control. "I love doing nothing," Spano said, grinning. "I love the feeling of the orchestra just going crazy and doing all this fantastic stuff, and I'm just along for the ride."

Spano taught at Tanglewood for six years and has trained dozens of aspiring maestros, but he has doubts about the effectiveness of pedagogy. "I begin from the premise that this stuff can't be taught," he said. "That way, I feel less guilty for screwing people up. So I keep focussed on the things that can be taught: how to make a clean gesture, where to place a downbeat, how to study the music." Memorizing the standard repertoire is a feat equivalent to learning by heart the complete works of Shakespeare, Ibsen,

and Shaw, and most conductors spend an enormous amount of time in solitude, poring over scores, banging them out at the piano, disassembling them into harmonies, melodic motifs, and structural diagrams, puzzling out why the composers arranged those elements in the way they did.

Spano continued, "What I can't teach people, however, is intention. If you have a clear intention, if the stereo inside your head is clicking along and giving you something that's exactly what you want, then it almost doesn't matter what you do with your hands."

A few weeks later, Spano stopped by my apartment, in New York, to watch a DVD, "The Art of Conducting: Legendary Conductors of a Golden Era." He had agreed to decode the performances of his forebears. "I feel like a retired football player on ESPN calling the plays," he joked, as we paused, rewound, and replayed a five-minute excerpt of Wilhelm Furtwängler conducting Richard Strauss's rollicking tone poem "Till Eulenspiegels Lustige Streiche," in 1950.

Furtwängler, with his gangly body, bald head, and expression of puzzled seriousness, resembled a disoriented stork. To me, his regular beating and the generic back-and-forth of his huge left hand did not look as if they could possibly account for the molten sound pouring from the Berlin Philharmonic.

"*Ooh*, that's fantastic," Spano said. "He's hot! He's got comic timing. They feel his attention. When he looks to the woodwinds, they know they're the foreground. I have to rethink this piece. He gets this German beer-hall stupid kind of thing going, which is perfect for this piece, and he got it not by shaping but by doing nothing and pulling back the tempo just a bit so that it's *thunk! thunk! thunk!*" Spano punched his palm to imitate the tread of boots on sawdust.

We skipped ahead to a segment from 1931, in which Willem Mengelberg led the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam in the Hungarian march from Berlioz's opera "La Damnation de Faust." Spano chuckled at the small, wild-eyed, wild-haired Mengelberg, who resembled Gene Wilder, frantically windmilling his arms. "He has an approach to this that's *sempre accelerando*"—constant acceleration—"so he's got to make sure that everyone's with him," Spano said. "He's paying attention to the back of the orchestra, or they'll be late; that's why his arms are so high. He's really working hard. If he were keeping a steady tempo, he wouldn't have to work so hard. It's always about to come apart at any moment, which is what makes it exciting. It must be so inspiring being in a room with a hundred nervous people being led by a wack job! He's obviously somewhat limited in technical ability, but I'm convinced there's a lot coming out of his eyes."

"The Art of Conducting" opens with footage, from 1969, of Herbert von Karajan leading the Berlin Philharmonic in a rehearsal of Strauss's swaggering "Ein Heldenleben." Karajan, who died in 1989, was a generation younger than Furtwängler and Mengelberg, and to watch him at work was to see an art form acquire a newfound elegance. Compared with Karajan, who had a cat burglar's grace, his precursors seemed murky and spastic.

"Ein Heldenleben" begins with a leonine growl in the cellos and basses, which Karajan released with a two-handed bouncing downbeat. He sat on a bar stool, his left hand mostly parked on his knee while he drew the baton through the air like a needle through velvet. When Karajan's left arm did move, his whole body moved with it, leaning deeply into a plush accent. "That chord is fantastic!" Spano said. "He doesn't want a 'bump'; he wants a *whoomph-fff*."

Karajan belonged to the first cohort of postwar conductors, and he and Leonard Bernstein essentially invented the figure of the itinerant super-maestro. Spano and I watched Bernstein at work, too, and we were both struck by how disciplined and clear his movements were, despite his tendency to dance at the podium. Why had the conductors who ascended after the Second World War developed a technique that was so much more specific and detailed than it had been before?

In the early twentieth century, imperial conductors had commanded a repertoire that was often limited to a small coterie of composers, and they frequently asked orchestra players to rehearse the same piece dozens of times. A half century later, the musical canon had grown dauntingly large and complex; moreover, a representative of the musicians' union hovered at the conductor's elbow, making sure that rehearsals didn't drag on too long. Meanwhile, the jet plane had made it possible for maestros to drop in on orchestras in New York, London, and Vienna in a single week, and orchestras were giving more concerts each year. Musicians had to learn new music very quickly, and rehearsals became brutally efficient. Bernstein, Karajan, and their nomadic peers developed the conducting tools they needed to elicit transcendence without wasting time. By the time the British conductor Simon Rattle had taken over the Berlin Philharmonic, in 2002, that orchestra (and most others like it) was expected to whip together virtually any composition in a few rehearsals, under any capable conductor, and be able to perform it with sterling accuracy.

Precise gestures produce precise sound, and the blossoming of technique after the Second World War was accompanied by a musical fetish for clarity. Pierre Boulez developed a fearsome gestural repertoire for executing the hyper-complex rhythms of modern compositions, including the ability to mark a different beat pattern with each hand. Boulez's approach, which arose as a response to the specific demands of modern compositions, soon spread to music of all periods, because it matched the needs of the global music industry—the high-fidelity LP, for example, captured every flaw in an orchestral performance.

The musical consequences of this trend have not been entirely salutary. Furtwängler relied on degrees of vagueness, especially in Strauss, where he regularly allowed the edges of a chord to bleed, and let the waves of fast fiddle notes gurgle indistinctly. Nowadays a hazy softness is judiciously applied in performance—Rattle does so exquisitely in Debussy—but it has become a special effect. Rattle's performance of "Ein Heldenleben" with the Berlin Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall in January was full of precision-magnified detail. You could make out the highlights on all those crystalline tremolos and follow the curve of each dewdrop pizzicato. Modern conducting sometimes feels like a glass skyscraper: initially thrilling, but finally irritating, in its relentless sheen.

Some conductors have resisted this new era of corporate efficiency. Spano and I watched the notoriously reluctant maestro Carlos Kleiber leading the Vienna Philharmonic in Brahms's Second

Symphony, in 1991. Kleiber conducted rarely, but when he did he conjured an atmosphere of bliss. His gestures were sporadic and vague; mainly, he leaned lovingly toward the orchestra, seeming less like a leader than like an enraptured listener. "This wouldn't work with any other orchestra in the world," Spano said. "He's giving no rhythmic impulse whatsoever! But he's getting this *amazing* line. It's glorious."

Teresa Marrin Nakra, a music professor at the College of New Jersey, in Ewing, has spent a large part of her career attempting to prove that even misty techniques for generating glory, such as Kleiber's, can be plotted on a graph. A violinist in high school and an aspiring conductor at Harvard, Nakra eventually decided that what she really wanted to do was find out how conducting works. In 1994, she began a master's program at the M.I.T. Media Lab; she finished her doctorate six years later.

Nakra took as her starting point the work of the Austrian psychiatrist Gerhart Harrer, who in the nineteen-seventies had fitted Karajan out with sensors and measured his vital signs during a performance of Beethoven's "Leonore" Overture No. 3. About halfway through the overture, just where it reaches its emotional peak and veers into minor, Karajan's heart rate leaped to a hundred and fifty beats per minute—quite rapid for a man in his sixties. Karajan liked piloting jets as well as orchestras; Harrer accompanied him to an airstrip, hooked him up with electrodes, and asked him to perform some airborne stunts. As Karajan dived toward earth, feinted toward a landing, and then, at the last moment, pulled the plane's nose back into a climb, the EKG needle hopped, but only gently. Beethoven had released a much more powerful spurt of adrenaline than buzzing an airstrip had.

Harrer had shown that conducting can provoke physiological reactions that mirror the emotional contours of a score. Nakra's goal was to decode those physical events and translate them into software. She wanted to develop a computer that could track a conductor's gestures. "The Holy Grail of computer science is to capture the messy complexity of the natural world and express it algorithmically," she told me. "Music expression can be measured quantitatively."

At first, she tried building a digital baton, which relayed its movements to a computer. But the tool was so packed with electronics that it looked and felt like a truncheon. Next, Nakra lined a body-hugging tunic with sensors—a "conductor's jacket," she called it in her dissertation—and placed it on several Boston-area maestros. "Conductors often shape the apparent viscosity of the air," she said. "To get a string legato, they'll make it look like they're moving the baton through molasses. So can we measure the muscle contraction in such a way as to show that?"

Nakra has used her data to build various conducting simulators. One installation has been making the rounds of children's museums: kids conduct a video of the Boston Pops, and when they swing an electronic baton faster the orchestra onscreen speeds up. She has built a digital conducting lab for Arizona State University which allows students to focus on technical problems by leading a synthetic ensemble. And she has made some progress in codifying actions that conductors execute without thinking. Leading up to a big fortissimo climax, conductors often relax and do nothing for an instant before giving the cue—a moment called "preparatory inhibition." Nakra also found that the sensors could distinguish between a meaningful gesture and an incidental movement: marking a beat produced regular spikes on a graph; a hand turning a page of the score looked like a shapeless blot.

Nakra eventually concluded that mapping the significance and effectiveness of conductors' movements is a lifelong project. "I believe that the whole reason we have live music is because of this great emotional, improvisational—but also planned—thing that's going on," she said. "It's inherently unpredictable, but it also has to be concrete. One human being is passing that information to another. If we're going to eliminate E.S.P., then the mechanism must be visual. Which means that we can at least observe it, so maybe we can measure it."

If any conductor lends himself to scientific measurement, it would be Lorin Maazel, the frighteningly competent music director of the New York Philharmonic. Critics regularly express frustration with his capricious interpretations, but nobody challenges his ability to get an orchestra to produce any effect he desires. By slowing the baton's passage through the air, he can stretch a melodic sigh and let it hang there, until he cares to complete the thought. He can nudge a crescendo with a twitch, and often seems to do so not from any deep musical conviction but simply because he can.

On the morning after the Philharmonic's opening-night gala last fall, the orchestra assembled on the stage of Avery Fisher Hall for its first regular rehearsal of the season. At precisely ten o'clock, Maazel ambled out to the podium. He muttered a perfunctory "Good morning," and began leading the orchestra through Mahler's Symphony No. 1 without even opening the score that sat on his music stand. His next words, three-quarters of an hour later, were "Third bar of A, third movement." The music started again. Maazel saw no need to voice corrections or explanations. His gestures were economical, too. He quieted a grumble of double-basses by waggling three fingers in front of his lips. His eyebrows contracted, and the strings produced a rich, honeyed sound. A moment later, the eyebrows lifted, and the tone became lyrical and light. Just before a brass fusillade in the fourth movement, Maazel glanced toward the back of the orchestra and cocked his left index finger. At the appointed instant, he brought the digit down as if flipping a switch, and the horns burst into a fearless fortissimo. The rehearsal, though virtually flawless, had an oddly inert feel; it seemed more like a collective limbering up than like a bout of artistic labor.

A few days later, Maazel slouched in an armchair in his fourth-floor studio, and said that it was important for rehearsals to be relaxing. "I don't think that after a rehearsal of mine the musicians feel exhausted," he said proudly. Maazel was a rare conducting prodigy—he had led most of the major American orchestras by the age of fifteen. Now, at seventy-six, he radiates ease and intuition in his profession: for him, memorizing scores is effortless, and so is hearing that the third bassoon's staccato has gone a little soft.

"It's always puzzled me why so many folks haven't learned to listen," he said.

"It's very simple to learn, and, once you've learned it, you have accomplished the first task of the conductor: to put the musician at ease so that he knows where he's at and so that he's well integrated into the total picture. That transforms the sound in a tenth of a second from something that is amorphous, unfocussed, and uncertain into a sound that is synchronized and together, because your musician, having been put at ease, is then able to do what he does at home. He's thinking of beauty of sound, breath control, phrasing."

He paused for a sixteenth-note rest before speaking again, in a tone that mirrored his musical style: assured, decisive, slightly anodyne. "Seven out of ten conductors—some very fine musicians—make motions and choreograph the music but don't have a clue of how to put the orchestra at ease, so that the musicians hunker down and don't look anymore and fall back on their own resources, and you get a stodgy, stiff sound." Productive serenity, he added, flows from the conductor's own command of the score, and his ability to empathize with the musicians.

"Conducting from memory is obviously important," he went on. "You're dealing with a hundred musicians who are seated in front of you and you get to know them by looking. You have a reel in your head of the performance you're conducting, and every once in a while what you're seeing doesn't match your reel. In two bars, the second trumpet is supposed to play a passage and he hasn't raised his trumpet. A conductor who's got his head in the score isn't going to catch that. Even when people are counting their seventy-three measures of rest correctly, there can be a doubt. Which is where cuing comes in. Take the opening of Dvořák's 'New World' Symphony, and that brass chord that so many people have trouble getting together. I *become* a brass player. I'm integrated into the task that they have, which is puckering up and blowing. I breathe, I don't move, and it's perfect."

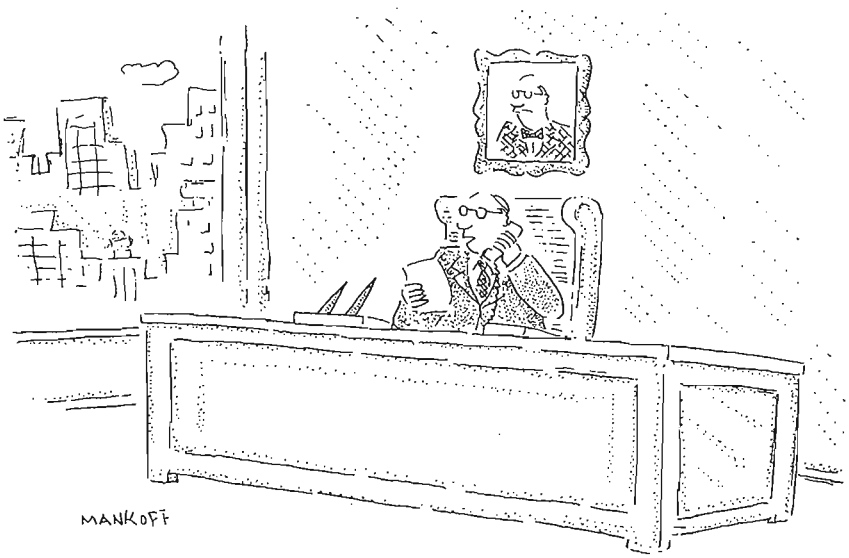
For the members of the Philharmonic, Maazel's light-fingered virtuosity represents a huge change from the style of his predecessor, Kurt Masur, who communicated more with vague elbow-wagging and shoulder-shrugging than with clear hand signals. What Masur could not suggest with gestures, he extracted by force of personality. The Philharmonic was a fractious place during Masur's tenure, from 1991 to 2002. Masur got into fights with the administration, musicians grumbled, and the board of directors finally nudged him out. (He now leads the Orchestre National de France.) Many of the concerts Masur led were sluggish, but he conjured some luminous Mendelssohn and fierce Shostakovich. The remarkable performance of Brahms's "Ein Deutsches Requiem" that Masur led nine days after the September 11th attacks was full of fluid warmth and muted fire.

Glenn Dicterow, the Philharmonic's concertmaster, told me, "Masur never gave up. He just worked and worked until he got it. Maazel has so much control that he can do tempos on the fly. He rehearses less. He likes to keep it fresh. It's an easier life."

Life with Masur was stressful partly because he saw his role in New York as that of a spiritual leader, harnessing the mystical side of his profession. This came out at disconcerting moments. Dicterow told me that, early in Masur's relationship with the orchestra, he conducted the beginning of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony simply by flinging out his arms, as if he were a munificent potentate hurling doubloons. The piece's first phrase is murderously difficult, because it starts with a rest (it's not *DA-da-da-DUM* but *GASP-da-da-da-DUM*), and because the pulse and the tension have to be established immediately. Dicterow approached Masur during a break and asked if the maestro might mark an extra beat, so the orchestra could figure out when to come in. Masur refused, insisting that the pulse would materialize on its own. "You must believe!" he pronounced. Astonishingly, Dicterow said, the gambit worked: Masur shot his arms out again, and the orchestra, ready and on edge, exploded. It's impossible to imagine Maazel taking that sort of chance.

One reason that conducting the Philharmonic is so difficult is that the orchestra members are as tetchy as they are gifted. Among the parade of guest conductors who took over the Philharmonic last fall was Mikko Franck, a Finn, who was only twenty-six at the time, and who conducted sitting down, because of back problems. His first rehearsal began with a Schnittke violin concerto. After a few run-throughs, a flutist asked him which of two possible ways she should play an irregular rhythm. He chose, and she answered testily that she hadn't been playing it that way before—hadn't he noticed? The remark was an unmistakable challenge to Franck's competence. "No, but that's how you'll do it now, right?" he answered, with a soft smile. The fumes dissipated, and he swept on. I have often heard it said that a guest has between two and five minutes in which to earn the musicians' respect.

Later, the Philharmonic's principal



"And you can rest assured that your problem is being ignored at the very highest levels."

cellist, Carter Brey, remarked that Franck had been so deft, so clear, and so authoritative that the issue of his age simply vanished. "The worst thing a young conductor can do is to get up in front of the New York Philharmonic and say what an honor it is to be here," Brey said. "Conductors have to project a very great self-assurance. We have an innate sense of how the piece should sound, we know how to make it sound natural, and we're ready at the drop of the hat to jump in and do that if the conductor loses control. There are conductors whom I've manipulated. I'll push a tempo or pull it back, if I feel there's no intensity coming from the podium. I don't have any patience with weak personalities."

The New World Symphony occupies a custard-colored Art Deco building in Miami Beach. Eighteen years ago, when Lincoln Road was still a dilapidated strip, Michael Tilson Thomas established the New World in a former movie palace, as a training orchestra for recent conservatory graduates. Now the orchestra is planning to trade up to a new home nearby, which will be designed by Frank Gehry. Tilson Thomas puts in several months a year here—roughly as much time as he spends with his main conducting job, as the leader of the San Francisco Symphony. No other orchestra in America is so identified with one man. Even his poodles, Banda and Shayna, trot around the New World's stage with a proprietary air.

The modern conductor's code of brevity—say just enough, but no more—doesn't appeal to Tilson Thomas, who likes to exercise his eloquence. At the New World, there are no union clock-watchers, and Tilson Thomas indulges his fondness for elaborate metaphors and long anecdotes. When I went to watch him in Miami, he was preparing a performance of Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony, a sprawling chronicle of the Battle of Leningrad. After the artillery-fired fury of the first movement, the second opens with a muted, shell-shocked waltz. To describe the shift in tone, Tilson Thomas intoned, "Meanwhile, in Madame Rupenskaya's dance studio . . ." The joke elicited a respectful chuckle. He then told his players a story about a Leningrad violinist who during the Second World War spent a night of bombing crouched in a toilet in the crumbling conservatory where he taught. A student went to check on him the next morning and the teacher greeted him joyfully: 'I'm so glad to see you. I've just worked out the most wonderful fingerings for the Balakirev Sonata!"

Tilson Thomas went on, "So you see, even in the middle of terrible events people concentrate on very elegant things to preserve their sanity." He stopped talking and began to conduct, gently coaxing a ravaged, aristocratic lilt out of the players, who sat before him in cargo shorts and flip-flops.

After the rehearsal, we crossed the street to Cafeteria, an antiseptically chic restaurant throbbing with a synthesized soundtrack of Mahler's Fifth Symphony laid over a world beat. For years, Tilson Thomas had a reputation as a haughty and difficult colleague. But his tenures in Miami and San Francisco have been content, and marked by a sense of collective adventure. "My life changed when I finally accepted that I was not giving the performance—the *musicians* are," he said. "It's my purpose to help them shape, prioritize, and decide, so that at the concert they can be as spontaneous and engaged as possible. The more artistic the musicians are, the more you can work, not on the little details but on the larger things. I once saw Charlie Chaplin rehearse some actors, and he told one, 'Say that line as if *you* were saying it.' He understood—it has to be the other guy's performance." He continued, "In the past, most conductors modelled themselves on one type of authority figure or another. You had the generals, the professors, the high priests, and so on. For me, it's more like being a coach or a director."

Tilson Thomas describes an orchestral performance as a fluid exchange of ideas. The conductor establishes a tempo, a clarinettist bends it expressively for a solo, and the conductor takes over again, allowing an extra breath or two before bringing the other players back in. Everyone needs to be prepared, alert, and flexible. "There are some conductors who like to establish an exact template in rehearsal of what the performance is going to sound like," Tilson Thomas said. "Then the concert gets judged in terms of how good a reproduction it is. I don't work that way. I feel that if a soloist does something a little differently, I have to make that difference make sense, so the next event will need to be a little different, too."

Later that day, Alberto Suarez, a horn player in the New World Symphony, put it more succinctly: "A lot of conductors come in and they interpret the piece for you. But great conductors interpret the piece *with* you."

Tilson Thomas's collaborative ideal derives in part from contemporary management fashions. If Mengelberg and his peers saw themselves as high priests and Bernstein's generation aspired to be micromanaging auteurs, then many of to-

IMAGINARY MENAGERIE

In the end, it was
as in the beginning: no one
learned anything. What was alive
was killed and posed,
stuffed, put on display. The remaining live
wandered around amongst the dead,
wondering what they looked like
when they were alive and in the positions
in which they were now posed, which the live
could have witnessed in life
had they not killed
the now
dead.

—Barbara Tran

day's music directors cultivate the khakis-and-shirtsleeves manner of a Silicon Valley C.E.O. In rehearsal, Tilson Thomas doesn't scream or threaten; he makes requests, not demands. He encourages orchestra members to call him by his first name, rather than "maestro." He makes allowances for musicians' moods and learns their children's names. Similarly, Spano—"Robert" to the Atlanta rank and file—spends most of his workdays in a faded blue polo shirt. James Levine oversees the Met and the Boston Symphony Orchestra in sweatpants.

Tilson Thomas has found that bringing democracy to the orchestral experience yields specific musical results. "There's a sense of spaciousness that's created using that technique," he told me. His open-ended interpretations with the San Francisco Symphony produce, at their best, a cinematic illusion, a vivid sense of location. I still remember a 1996 performance of Ives's "New England Holidays" Symphony, at Carnegie Hall, in which the musicians' separate cameos each had a distinct weight and gleam. In the "Washington's Birthday" movement, a percussionist playing chimes summoned distant church bells tolling across snowy fields. When the scene moved indoors, where polkas and waltzes collided in the rafters of a great dance hall, it was a violinist in the rear of the string section, and not the concertmaster, who played the solo, so that the fiddler sawing out old folk tunes seemed to be lurking in a dark corner. In Mahler symphonies, too, Tilson Thomas nurtures this sense of independence, as if his players were scattered on different peaks, communing across Alpine valleys. During a crystalline performance of Mahler's Fifth Symphony in San Francisco last fall, I had the feeling that Tilson Thomas's flamboyant physicality drew the players into his circle of experience and signalled his gratitude for the way they played.

There is another reason that Tilson Thomas and his colleagues tend to be less dictatorial than conductors in the past: these days, it's easier to get rid of a music director than it is a rank-and-file violinist. As James Conlon told me, "You cannot be arbitrary in your dealing with the music or the players. You've got to govern by consent." Even the most respected and businesslike conductors can have trouble winning over a particular ensemble. When Marin Alsop, one of the few women to reach the top ranks of her profession, was appointed music director of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, in July of 2005, some of the musicians voiced a rare public complaint. (They were overruled.)

I asked Tilson Thomas what happens when a conductor and an orchestra fail to connect. The smile on his long, vulpine face hardened slightly. "It's amazing how mercurial, specific, and fragile the balance is in the human interactions in orchestras," he said at last. "So many things can change the way the feeling is. A lot of it has to do with how confident everyone is in the first place, how comfortable they are with the repertoire, with the acoustic, with one another. It has to do with exactly which players are there according to the rotation."

He went on, "The difference between a veteran conductor and someone inexperienced is that the veteran is able to hear more of what's going on. You're thinking about yourself less and the music more. But if you're nervous or disturbed by something nonmusical, if the conductor senses tension, if he's not sure the musicians approve of him, or if the musicians aren't sure they're being approved of, then the energy can dissipate."

As I listened to Tilson Thomas try to describe the way bad feelings can sabotage the music, I thought about what Clive Gillinson, the artistic director of Carnegie Hall, had said to me a few days earlier: "People forget what a lonely profession conducting is. You're up there by yourself and you don't have anyone to tell you, 'You're talking too much,' or 'You're not saying enough.' You have all these people looking at you. And you don't really know what they're thinking."

This February, Robert Spano came to New York to face a conductor's riskiest challenge: a world première. On four occasions, he led Dawn Upshaw and the New York Philharmonic in a performance of John Harbison's limpid "Milosz Songs," a setting of poems by Czeslaw Milosz, featuring delicate interludes by harp and celesta. On the afternoon of the final performance, Spano arrived at Avery Fisher Hall snuffling and exhausted. He spent most of lunchtime staring at a box of take-out sushi. I asked him how he felt about the new piece, now that he had drawn it off the page, after weeks of study, and into the physical world. "Right now, I'm totally committed to it," he answered. "Sometime in the next couple of weeks, I'll know how I feel about it." He added, "Our instinct is to react and form judgments very quickly, and with a new piece one's understanding will change over time." When I heard Harbison's work, it struck me as well wrought but overly polite; Spano's performance, however, had deftly highlighted its strongest quality—a kind of hushed prayerfulness.

I mentioned a couple of world premières that I sometimes fantasized about attending: Beethoven's Seventh; Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring." I wondered how clearly the first listeners and performers had perceived the violent originality of those works, or understood that they were hearing future classics.

"I have diminishing interest in posterity," Spano said. "I no longer feel that the test of the value of something is time. What's much more important is the power of a musical experience in a given moment. And that can happen with a Paganini violin piece that most of us agree shouldn't be called a masterpiece. I think of composers as setting up possibilities, not creating objects. There's no such thing as Beethoven's Seventh. It's only a hypothesis." Spano was silent for a while, then he said, "Pieces of music are wormholes, which we can enter to escape our normal experience of time."

Just then, a Philharmonic staffer came to call Spano to the stage for a sound check. He jumped to his feet, instantly energized. I recalled something he had told me earlier. "You have to invest in a piece's greatness," he said of Harbison's work. "As far as I'm concerned, it is a masterpiece until proven otherwise." Spano, grinning, hurried off to the podium, carrying a briefcase full of scores with him. ♦

THE ASPEN TIMES

August 1, 2023

Jaw-dropping Mahler, Rachmaninoff make for great weekend

By Harvey Steiman

Two of the most remarkable performances of the year highlighted a strong weekend of exciting music-making at the Aspen Music Festival. It took something special to top Friday's knockout performance of Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3 by the teenage Yunchan Lim, but Sunday's majestic Mahler Symphony No. 3 did.

Superlative conducting and orchestral playing by musicians at the top of their game combined to produce something like a miracle Sunday. That's what Mahler was after in the six movements of his longest and most joyful symphony. It starts with battling marches, moves through explorations of nature's splendor, detours to uplifting song, and finally builds a series of increasingly ecstatic hymns to a glorious finale.

It just might be conductor Robert Spano's greatest work in a 13-year tenure as the festival's music director. Again and again he found just the right pace and shaped phrases with subtlety and carefully judged dynamics. Over the piece's 100 minutes he laid the groundwork in the musical development with infinite patience to climb several mountaintops in a monumental finale.

Robert Spano

SAN DIEGO STORY

May 6, 2023

Robert Spano Leads the San Diego Symphony in Compelling Lutosławski and Rachmaninoff

By Ken Herman

Robert Spano, who recently completed his lauded 20-year tenure as Music Director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, conducted the San Diego Symphony Friday at the Rady Shell. Spano's program balanced the familiar—Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto—with the less familiar, Witold Lutosławski's 1954 *Concerto for Orchestra* and Brian Raphael Nabors' recent commission from the Atlanta Symphony "Onward."

Although Lutosławski is one of eastern Europe's most highly regarded composers from the second half of the 20th century, the San Diego Symphony has paid him scant attention. In 2018, guest conductor Johannes Debut led the orchestra in a shorter Lutosławski work, his *Little Suite*, but otherwise the highly regarded Pole has been overlooked.

Like Bartók's well-known *Concerto for Orchestra*, Lutosławski's work presents a work of serious scope and depth, three movements that engage the entire orchestra in a rewarding virtuoso venture. The first movement opens with grand, pulsing themes marked by a throbbing drum beat that goads the full orchestra into powerful crescendos. Having gained his audience's full attention, the composer shifts to a stark, quiet section in which the woodwinds offer mysterious arabesques.

Anxious yet animated themes from high-pitched instruments scamper in the middle movement, "Capriccio notturno e arioso," while bolder themes from the orchestra's lowest instruments create tense anticipation in the fashion of a bold scherzo. Lutosławski clearly does not abandon tonality as many of his contemporaries in Western Europe did in this post-World War II era, but his use of folk music themes provides modal coloring that expands his harmonic palette. After the strings' pizzicato dance-like interlude, this movement ends abruptly with quiet drumming.

The heart of this *Concerto for Orchestra* is its lengthy final movement, "Passacaglia, toccata e corale." In traditional passacaglia style, the contrabass section introduces the bass theme, a sturdy pizzicato motif, upon which the passacaglia will unfold. Other low-pitched instruments crowd the scene until the English Horn announces a vigorous countersubject, played with her customary authority by Andrea Overturf. When the full string section climbs on board, they give this new subject brazen, martial overtones, which the percussion section amplifies as the passacaglia comes to a majestic climax. In the toccata section, vibrant strings and spirited brass fanfares compete as fragments of the majestic final chorale enter this powerful, driving finale.

Spanos proved a most trustworthy guide for the orchestra in this adventurous

score, and he secured from the players a consistently confident—even polished—account of this major work.

Not surprisingly, Sergei Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3 in D Minor, has not been neglected by the San Diego Symphony. In recent years pianists Kirill Gerstein and Behzod Abduraimov have given their accounts of this concerto with the orchestra, so it was about time for the American virtuoso Garrick Ohlsson to weigh in on this popular chestnut from the great Russian Romantic school of concertos.

Spano's tempo choice for the opening movement, an *allegro* with just the proper amount of urgency, served well the movement and its main theme, which plays an important role throughout the concerto. I expected Ohlsson's confident traversal of the composer's unrelenting and demanding flamboyant cascades, but I was impressed with the elegant cantabile tone he coaxed from the orchestra's Steinway throughout the lengthy concerto. Rachmaninoff wrote this concerto for himself to play on his 1909-1910 concert tour of the United States, and he gave himself ample opportunity to reveal the extent of both his musical invention and his vaunted keyboard technique.

Principal Oboe Sarah Skuster gave an enchanting account of the solo that opens the wistful *Adagio* movement, and once the piano finally appeared after an unusually extended introduction, Ohlsson caressed Rachmaninoff's ardent piano theme that so completely captures his lush, late-Romantic idiom.

Spano urged both orchestra and soloist to indulge fully the grandeur of the *Finale* as it builds its martial theme and recalls golden moments from earlier sections of the concerto. It would be difficult to imagine a more compelling account of this sumptuous, powerful concerto.

Nabors' compact but engaging "Onward" offered nattering fanfares poised in static orchestral suspension. Valiant horn calls and swift orchestral glissandos gave this 10-minute piece the excitement of an action movie sound track.

Robert Spano

The Dallas Morning News

April 22, 2023

Fort Worth Symphony evokes fantasies and legends — with dancers

By Scott Cantrell

If you're up for a really imaginative, stimulating orchestra concert, repeats of the Fort Worth Symphony's Friday night concert are highly recommended.

The program, ranging from the Prelude to Engelbert Humperdinck's opera Hansel and Gretel to the world premiere of Brian Raphael Nabors' Of Earth and Sky: Tales from the Motherland, could have been titled "Fantasies and Legends." It was filled out with evocative works by Ravel and Charles Tomlinson Griffes, and Stravinsky's 1919 Firebird Suite was performed with 12 dancers from Texas Ballet Theater. With music director Robert Spano conducting, at Bass Performance Hall, the orchestra played throughout with skill and sophistication.

Nabors, an Alabama native in his early 30s, with a doctorate in composition from the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, draws on African myths in his 25-minute, four-movement suite. The middle movements weren't clearly differentiated — supertitles would have been helpful — but here's what I gleaned:

"Huveane Moves Away from the Humans" evokes divine creation, then withdrawal, in sonic bursts, chatters and fanfares. "Anansi" portrays a wily

teacher and trickster — a counterpart to the coyote of American Indian mythology — in brightly colored, elaborately layered dances.

"Nyami Nyami," a Tonga dragon god, is represented with explosions and flashes, then somber musings by violas. Finally, "Celebration" is a blowout of feisty dances, percussion driven, bristling with syncopations and busy counterpoints. This could also be excerpted as a flashy concert opener.

Spano and the orchestra gave a brilliant performance, prefaced by Nabors' personable video introduction, projected on a big screen over the stage.

Humperdinck's opera is based on the Grimm brothers' fairytale. Its prelude deftly mingles music noble, tender, happy and downright jolly. FWSO horns were in particularly fine form in their opening moments to shine.

Ravel's five-movement Mother Goose Suite draws on Charles Perrault's children's tales. Spano led the orchestra in a performance of diaphanous delicacies, with just enough sparkle at the right moments and a suavely calibrated final crescendo.

Charles Tomlinson Griffes, a pioneering American impressionist who lived from 1884 to 1920, was represented by his 1919 tone poem, The Pleasure Dome of Kubla Khan, inspired by Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem Kubla Khan. "Exotic" textures, melodies and harmonies rise to a climax of telling splendor before fading away.

With the orchestra playing the Stravinsky upstage from stand lights, evocatively costumed dancers, vividly choreographed by Tim O'Keefe, brought the Firebird action to life downstage. The sinister Kastchei (Carl Coomer) and his minions jerked and flung themselves about in red and black. In a brilliant red tutu, Nicole Von Enck's Firebird flitted and pirouetted as if lighter than air.

Andre Silva's Prince Ivan was very much the danseur noble, Rieko Hatato the gracious Princess Tsarevna, abetted by four princesses in pink.

Yet again, Spano had the orchestra vividly characterizing the music, from finely finished pianissimos to thrilling but carefully controlled explosions of brass. It was a concert to leave you full of wonder at both music and musicians — and this time at dancers, as well.

OPERA NEWS

January 27, 2023

Werther

HOUSTON
Houston Grand Opera
By Gregory Barnett

IT SHOULD BE HARD TO MAKE the poet Werther a relevant character in the twenty-first century. In 2023, we would recommend therapy or antidepressants, possibly even psychiatric care, for what we would likely identify, clinically, as emotional problems rather than artistic temperament. And in the modern era, we tend to see a man who obsesses compulsively over a woman as a danger to her. Yet in its new production of Massenet's opera (seen Jan. 27), Houston Grand Opera allowed its audience to feel complete empathy for Werther's tragic story with soaring and then melting vocal lines, rich, impassioned orchestral interludes and a last-act coup de théâtre of set design.

It would be hard to imagine a better Werther than the supercharged, dreamy-to-febrile characterization that tenor Matthew Polenzani offered in his HGO debut. However, it was the quality of Polenzani's consistently sweet, legato singing, passionately strong in "Pourquoi me réveiller," or feebly dying away in "No ... Charlotte ... je meurs," that made him a distinguished interpreter of the role.

Isabel Leonard, also making her HGO debut, made Charlotte's strength of character and her struggle with her feelings for Werther clear and audible. Leonard's mezzo-soprano has an apt core of strength throughout her range, ideal for the conscience-stricken Charlotte. As Charlotte's younger sister, Sophie, American soprano Jasmine Habersham (another HGO debut) deployed her light, flexible soprano to establish the youthful character of a teenager, but altered her sound to suggest sustained intensity as Sophie is drawn into Werther and Charlotte's conflict. American baritone Sean Michael Plumb made his HGO debut in this *Werther* as Charlotte's husband, Albert, singing with a smoothly attractive voice. This lyric quality suited the "nice-guy" Albert that we see for most of the opera, but perhaps diminished the edge required when Albert confronts Charlotte over Werther's visit in Act III and then insists that she send his pistols to Werther, in spite of the obvious danger of doing so.

Patrick Carfizzi, with an always satisfying bass-baritone sound as the Bailiff, was a spirited and playful stage presence. As his six younger children, Benjamin Armstrong, Olivia Atanu, Elizabeth Garcia, Daniel Karash, Dante Petrozzi, and Peter Theurer supplied the innocently exuberant caroling that Massenet used to frame Werther's tragedy. Current Studio Artists Cory McGee (Johann), Ricardo Garcia (Schmidt), Luke Sutliff (Brühlmann), and Emily Treigle (Kätchen) provided the comic relief, whether in

Brühlmann and Kätchen's "Klopstock!" interjection, or Johann and Schmidt's drunken banter. McGee's bass was a standout for its projection and resonance.

HGO's new *Werther*, the company's first staging of the opera in forty years, was a joint production with the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, where it was first seen in 2004, and Opéra National de Paris. The production, by French director Benoît Jacquot, gives a disciplined nineteenth–century bourgeois formality to Werther and Charlotte's interactions until their Act III kiss. But it's rarely a good idea to have singers facing away from the audience, as Johann and Schmidt do at the beginning of Act II, and Charlotte's exclamation at Werther's return in Act III was diminished by his non-arrival for a few moments more (and from the opposite corner of the stage, toward which she wasn't looking). Charles Edwards's set design efficiently but vividly captured the four different places of the opera's four acts. The standout moment centered on his depiction of Werther's study, a three-sided onstage cube, with the remaining side open toward the audience. The interior and scale were reminiscent of a starving-artist's garret, but its distinguishing feature lay in how it moved slowly forward, almost imperceptibly, throughout the orchestral introduction to the last act. The effect was cinematic, as if the camera were steadily zooming in on the scene of the near-dead Werther.

Robert Spano conducted the performance, which achieved a perfect balance between stage and pit and featured moving performances of Massenet's orchestral interludes by the HGO Orchestra, the bardic signifier of Joan Eidman's fine harp playing during Werther's reading of Ossian's verses, and the exotic sound of Scott Plugge's saxophone playing during Charlotte's "Air des larmes."

Robert Spano

The Dallas Morning News

September 10, 2022

Robert Spano makes a splendid debut as the Fort Worth Symphony's new music director

A respected veteran, Spano brought new flexibility and suavity to Friday's concert.

By Scott Cantrell

If symphonic music holds any appeal, consider this a strong "buy" recommendation for one of the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra's repeat performances this weekend. In his first concert as the orchestra's new music director, Robert Spano brought new flexibility and expressive suavity to Friday night performances that were compelling start to finish.

The last two decades have seen dramatic improvements in both the Fort Worth and Dallas symphony orchestras. Miguel Harth-Bedoya's 20 years as FWSO music director turned a sometimes scruffy provincial outfit into quite an accomplished ensemble. Jaap van Zweden's 10 years with the DSO turned a very good orchestra into one often playing on the highest level.

Now both orchestras have richly experienced and respected veterans, both in their early 60s, at their helms: Spano with the FWSO, Fabio Luisi with the DSO. Both seem destined to bring new refinements and subtleties.

Coming to Fort Worth after 20 years heading the Atlanta Symphony, Spano opted for a conservative season-opening program at Bass Performance Hall. But this was probably a wise way to establish basic discipline and expectations.

The three 19th-century works from the Austro-German standard rep were

composed within a mere 65 years. Spano took them in reverse chronology with the concerto, unusually, at the end.

The newest of the works, Brahms' Variations on a Theme by Haydn, invokes an even earlier composer, although the theme probably isn't by Haydn. Opening the concert, the performance set the tone for all that followed.

Rhythmic buoyancy was allied to bold contrasts and subtle shadings, with pianissimos as "charged" as they were delicate. The music smiled when it should, even danced at times.

Balances were carefully gauged. Even the FWSO trumpets, in the past often too loud, fit aptly in the ensemble — with the help of mellower rotary-valve instruments.

The Schubert B minor Symphony (D. 749), the best known of several symphonies the composer left unfinished, came next. Most of us familiar with the work probably think of it as "pleasant," far less confrontational than Beethoven's symphonies.

Spano, on the other hand, brought out the music's unsettled, even spooky, character. Among those "charged" pianissimos, even in the cellos' famous first-movement melody, full-orchestra assertions felt all the more portentous. It was an unusual performance, but, without falsifying the piece, it made me hear it in wholly new ways.

After intermission, pianist Jorge Federico Osorio served up the freshest Beethoven Emperor Concerto in memory. Defying auto-pilot norms, Osorio favored a subtly nuanced, sometimes almost improvisatory approach.

He hesitated before and on pivotal downbeats, to great effect, but didn't hesitate to nudge the music along where it could use added urgency. Cascades of notes were elegantly tapered. Spano had the orchestra perfectly coordinated.

Unfortunately, the audience was plunged in darkness during the concert, leaving no way to read even movement markings. Half-light, please! But the program book print was so minuscule that a magnifying glass would be necessary in even bright light.

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

June 10, 2022

Spano says farewell with Mahler's Symphony No. 3

By Jon Ross

It had to end this way. Mezzo soprano Kelley O'Connor, who has collaborated with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Robert Spano frequently over the past two decades, was there. So too was a contingent from the ASO Chorus, which has shared in some of Spano's greatest triumphs as music director, and the Georgia Boy Choir.

On Thursday night, the start of Spano's last weekend of concerts leading the ASO, it had to be the massive third symphony by Gustav Mahler, performed by what looked to be the largest collection of musicians that have been on the Symphony Hall stage since the start of the pandemic. Spano led a very different ASO in the work in 2010, around the halfway mark in his tenure with the orchestra. In 1984, Robert Shaw led the only other ASO performance of the composition, which is presented without intermission.

Spano, of course, is no stranger to lengthy Mahler compositions. He was at the podium for the all-hands-on-deck performance of Symphony No. 8, better known as the "Symphony of A Thousand," in November 2019 — a crowning achievement in his quest, along with principal guest conductor Donald Runnicles, to perform a

complete cycle of the 10 Mahler symphonies. O'Connor was also onstage for that, as were the ASO Chorus, the Georgia Boy Choir and what indeed seemed like a million other voices.

Length was never an issue on Thursday. Even at more than 100 minutes, the six-movement Mahler masterwork felt like it couldn't be edited it all. The first movement ran well past the 30-minute mark, but never sounded overly long. Spano had the musicians playing with determination and vigor, moving the music along even in the quietest passages. There are passages played at a murmur, but the symphony also has plenty of noise — all those musicians playing fortissimo, the E-flat clarinet yelling out at top volume. Those bracing scenes of cacophony intensified the quiet.

There's such a force of instrumental voices on stage that a certain depth of sound is a given, but Spano's deliberate care made sure the ensemble's blend and unified dynamics remained a focus. This seemed no easy task; at any point in the work, myriad instrumental sections are playing different themes, approaching the music with a different feel. For much of the piece, brass leads the charge. Over the last decade, the low brass has become a reliable asset for the ASO, and Thursday night was their time to shine, from the magisterial opening bars of the first movement to leading blisteringly forceful sections later in the piece.

The entire composition is, by design, rife with pastoral ambiance, but doesn't rely on woodwinds to create a woodsy feel. At times, concertmaster David Coucheron turned his Stradivarius into a country fiddle, playing a tuneful passage; later, the entire ensemble mimicked animal calls.

There were moments of such exquisite delight hat they almost come as a surprise. Principal oboe Elizabeth Koch Tiscione, at the start of the second movement, played a skipping, carefree solo over a lush pizzicato fog, passing her melody effortlessly to the violins as the dynamics grew louder. In the fourth movement, O'Connor took the stage for what sounded almost like the blues — complete with what sounded like blue notes from the orchestra — but instead of conveying abject mourning or even a gentle warning for the text that begins with "O Man! Take Heed!," she affected a more forceful tone, at times full of delicious contempt carried to the audience on carefully enunciated German. After O'Connor's solo, the 50-odd women of the ASO Chorus and the pint-sized Georgia Boy Choir, who had been sitting attentively on risers behind the orchestra for more than an hour, finally saw the spotlight. In the scheme of the symphony, it's a blink-and-you-miss it appearance, but the choirs, in fine voice Thursday after being tasked to sing after sitting for so long, added a grain at once both light and deep to the proceedings.

The symphony ended with a gentle instrumental hymn, a sotto voce reflection of everything that has come to pass (and it does feel like Mahler's symphony has everything). There felt like no greater way to sum up Robert Spano's career in Atlanta.

The Dallas Morning News

April 9, 2022

Robert Spano leads Fort Worth Symphony in winning performances of varied works

By Tim Diovanni

You've got to hear the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra this weekend. If you're in Dallas, it's worth the drive on I-30.

On Friday night, at Bass Performance Hall, music director-designate Robert Spano led the orchestra in winning performances of varied repertoire. Everything was finely balanced, paced and scaled.

Spano officially takes over as music director in the fall, after two decades at the Atlanta Symphony, among the 25 largest orchestras in the country.

It was somewhat surprising that he took the job at the smaller-budget FWSO. Some view this as a lateral move, or even a step back. But Spano and the orchestra obviously have great chemistry; the musicians responded admirably to his clear and economical direction on Friday.

Spano has long championed music by living American composers, including Jennifer Higdon. She was represented on the FWSO program in her best known work, *Blue Cathedral*.

Composed after the death of her brother, *Blue Cathedral* features calls and responses between the flute, Higdon's instrument, and the clarinet, her brother's. The music is often serene, mixing influences from 20th-century Americans — Copland and Barber, for example — and impressionists, like Debussy. But darker energies sometimes surface, with declarative brass, biting strings and pounding drums.

Here and elsewhere, Spano cultivated soft dynamics, making fortes more dramatic and meaningful. Principal flutist Jake Fridkis and principal clarinetist Stanislav Chernyshev deserve praise for their sensitive duets. The only downside of the reading was a chirping cricket ringtone that went off twice on a patron's phone.

Pianist Angela Cheng joined the orchestra in Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*.

Rachmaninoff varies a catchy tune by Paganini, an Italian composer and violin virtuoso, and combines it with the "Dies irae" chant from the Catholic requiem mass. Among other pieces, the "Dies irae" also appears in Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*, which the Dallas Symphony played Friday.

Cheng unspooled songlike melodies with melting lyricism, flew through rhapsodic flourishes with sparkling clarity and unleashed fiery sounds when needed. In playful passages, she relished off-beat accents and "wrong" notes. She also paid close attention to the orchestra, which skillfully complemented her style. Standing ovations happen all the time around here, but this one felt more charged than usual.

Pianist Angela Cheng plays Rachmaninoff's "Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini" with the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra at Bass

Performance Hall in Fort Worth, TX on April 8, 2022.

Respighi's *Fountains of Rome* and *Pines of Rome*, both tone poems, evoke moods and scenes that the composer associated with different places around the Italian capital.

The FWSO served up sumptuous riches, with characterful woodwinds and powerful brass and percussion. Polished solos emerged from the orchestra one after the next. In *Pines of Rome* principal trumpeter Kyle Sherman brought subdued dignity to his offstage part, phrasing lines lyrically. And clarinetist Chernyshev lovingly shaped nocturnal music representing the song of the nightingale.

Spano revealed an ability to build crescendos, reach stirring heights and gradually release the tension. He also mostly reined in the trumpets, which tend to stick out from the ensemble.

The program booklet supplied notes for Higdon's piece, but none of the other selections, instead offering full-page biographies of Spano, Cheng and Higdon. I could also do without *The Star-Spangled Banner* at the start of every FWSO concert.

But these are just quibbles for a fine evening. Spano returns to conduct the orchestra on opening night of the 2022-23 season Sept. 9. Mark your calendars, or go see him lead the FWSO today or tomorrow.

DC METRO
THEATER ARTS

March 9, 2022

Washington National Opera's 'Written in Stone': opera as American as apple pie

Four world premieres at Kennedy Center point to the future of the art form and tell stories that relate directly to the American experience.

By Susan Galbraith

Saturday night the Eisenhower stage at The Kennedy Center boasted not just one world premiere of an opera, but four, and all pointing to the future of the art form for this century. All were written in English and aimed to tell stories that relate directly to the American experience. Turns out opera is American as apple pie.

Washington National Opera (WNO) has championed new American works and voices in its American Opera Initiative (AOI) series for over ten years. Artistic Director Francesca Zambello envisioned the commissions as a tribute to the Kennedy Center's 50th Anniversary and a way of bringing back together some of the family that Zambello holds dear. (See my recent interview with her.)

Zambello assigned a common theme: Washington itself as a city of iconic monuments. She gave the creative teams the freedom to tell a story inspired by a monument of their own choosing.

In Washington, history feels scaled like opera, where the stakes are always high and decisions are taken very much to heart. Now we live at the intersection of the crisis of American democracy itself and the current world crisis caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

It is no wonder then that the most moving moment in the evening came as a prelude to the operas themselves. General Director Timothy O'Leary announced from the stage that several members of the WNO Orchestra are Ukrainian and invited the audience to stand in solidarity. Against a scrim, the sky blue and yellow Ukrainian flag waved, and the orchestra played Ukraine's national anthem while members of the Cafritz Young Artists Program sang. The stage became a living monument and tribute to people who will not back down from a Russian bully. We were all one in that moment and such an outpouring of feeling, something we all needed as release. This is what music can do.

It seemed fitting that the great American conductor Robert Spano would lead the orchestra for this program, making his WNO debut. He faced the challenge of excavating four different music universes. In doing so with such sensibilities, he earned the respect of the fine returning orchestra members and gave the living composers the opportunity to hear their works fully.

Putting the very different shows on in the Eisenhower together offered other challenges, which the design team met

with most creative solutions. While not exactly "intimate," the Eisenhower stage is certainly smaller than the Opera House but larger than the Terrace, where the AOI programs are usually offered. Placing the orchestra not in the pit but upstage of the singers created not only a better balance of sound but scaled things for smaller chamber-sized ensembles.

With four enormous rectangular frames and a scrim, Set Designer Erhard Rom designed a set that worked for multiple venues featuring different monuments. Rom created giant surfaces that S. Katy Tucker used for projections, choosing photos shot from different angles and in black and white to give the monument giants a unified look through light and shadow. Lighting Designer Mark McCullough added color periodically to affect mood, and the stage pictures were thus elegant and dramatic. Sadly, all too rarely were we given a glimpse of the orchestra, which seemed crammed inside monumental walls.

The first piece up, **Chantal,** was billed as a prelude, only eight minutes, and a "tribute to Monumentalism" by the husband and wife team Jason and Alicia Hall Moran, who collaborated on the one-woman piece. Director of the Jazz Program Jason Moran is known in the KC family as a most wonderful producer, collaborator, and composer in his own right, and mezzo-soprano, multi-media artist Hall Moran has a gorgeous stage presence. But her sound-making seemed to come from another universe than what goes by the name of classical opera with its rules of vocal placement and focus.

The piece's message was also a little confusing. We watched a surveyor in flannel work shirt with a hardhat measure the leaning of one of DC's newest monuments, the statue of MLK. She wonders if their positions have changed, meaning, I supposed, more than physically in space but politically. She ruminates, "A monument is an answer. A monument is a question." The opera is a koan. The opera is a curiosity.

The evening featured Kamala Sankaram's second commission by WNO. The first was produced in 2019, a powerful hour-long work, *Taking Up Serpents*, with librettist Jerry Dye. For this program, ***Rise,*** she created with librettist A.M. Homes.

They chose as inspiration the 1921 Portrait Monument by a female sculptor featuring Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony, with an additional face left uncarved. The mysterious suffragist monument, with the story of why it had been junked in a closet for so many years, was tantalizing. Sankaram and Homes wanted to give a voice to those whose stories have been left out of history. Vanessa Becerra carries the story of a young Girl Scout, Alicia Hernández, who gets lost in the Capitol on a field trip to DC, becomes separated from her troupe, and can't figure out, looking at the monuments, how she fits into the narrative. Becerra lends charm and comic delight to the role, and she throws off the high piano notes with ease.

The trouble lies in the libretto. Alicia's journey of self-discovery doesn't get very deep. The young girl is hoping to "get a badge and a chest" for this outing. There's a whole scene when she has to circumnavigate a "very powerful woman." (The figure was supposed to pay tribute to Nancy Pelosi.) Sung by Darryl Freedman, the woman comes across more cartoonish than stately, while, in their scene, Becerra hops and doubles over to suppress bladder urges. The historical lack of bathroom accommodations made for women at the Capitol became a tired running joke.

Sankaram's score uses marches featuring snare drum to pound in the political message.

One of the best scenes was between the young scout and a security officer. The wonderful J'nai Bridges gives us a strong cameo in the character of the policewoman, and she packs a lot of physical detail and pathos into her portrait, lending the work strength and gravitas. Danielle Talamantes has a lovely voice and intonation and, as Alicia's mother, also demonstrated emotional connection and verisimilitude, but alas, she wasn't directed to deliver the same style of performance.

The mixture of styles became confusing. Intending to be a "smart" story, Freedman ranted like a modern Walkurie while Suzannah Waddington

looked like a bride figurine on a wedding cake designed by the sculptor Botero, and the resolution made the whole journey of finding oneself trite, while feminism came across as those two hated bywords "shrill" and "silly."

it all falls down was the most fully realized piece of the evening. With a libretto by Kennedy Center's Vice President and Artistic Director of Social Impact Marc Bamuthi Joseph and a score by Kennedy Center's Composer-in-Residence Carlos Simon, the opera from the jumpstart demonstrated we were in the hands of a team who knew how to tell a story with words and music contributing to a satisfying whole. They focused dramatic action on a father and son's generational rift, and the forward movement musically proved their story satisfied the Three Bears principle of being "just right."

Christian Mark Gibbs plays Bklyn, the son of a preacher, and his father Mtchll, played by Alfred Walker, takes us into a Black Church community where we watch Mtchll on the day he'll be passing his preaching in the pulpit to his son.

J'nai Bridges plays Laurel, Mtchll's wife and mother to Bklyn, torn up by the lie she sees her son living and the father's inability to recognize and reconcile with his son's homosexuality. She gives a tour de force performance as a woman full of equal parts grace and pain. Gibbs is phenomenal as Bklyn, a tenor not afraid to pull back, shape, and then build sound and extend notes to forever. Walker makes up this powerful singing trio, and he is arresting as the pastor whose worldview is shaken.

The opera is tip-top in every aspect, from the bodacious "crowns" of the Black women in the church to the powerful, down-to-the-toes earth-shaking voices of the chorus. The opera puts the whole question of how to include people in our understanding of God-love squarely back on us, the audience, to examine the choices before us.

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The second half of the program was filled by **The Rift,** a story told from four different perspectives about the most emotionally-laden monument, The Vietnam War Memorial.

Award-winning composer Huang Ruo and librettist, renowned playwright, and screenwriter David Henry Hwang recount the competition to design the memorial and its surprise winner, who at the time was only a student at Yale. Because submissions were handled anonymously, when it was announced that a young student had won the competition and a girl, and not just a girl, but an Asian girl, reactions were volatile.

Karen Vuong plays Maya Lin, the architecture student, and she is a superb singer-actor. Her arias are some of the best written and performed in the evening. Her performance of "Chinese as Apple Pie" knocked me out.

Hwang's libretto is risky, expanding the scope of the war story to include many perspectives and force several character changes by the nimble performers. The staging gets necessarily "workshoppy" in that regard, but the writing evokes the times accurately and powerfully. Ruo's score also has moments of great emotional power, although much seems to come from the composer John Adams's school of music, including rifts and cadences seemingly taken from his *Doctor Atomic* opera.

There are four fine performances, though it seems to be dozens of personifications and voices. Rod Gilfry plays Robert McNamara, a different kind of "architect," and he's a dead ringer for the man who as Secretary of Defense escalated an unwanted war with the hubris that the U.S. could win only to have even his family turn on him. Gilfry conveys both the arrogant defensiveness and the torment that hounded him for the rest of his days from his role in the war. Nina Yoshida Nelsen takes us into the heart of a South Vietnamese soldier's widow, who like so many touched by that war kept searching for closure. Christian Mark Gibbs returns in the program as Grady Mitchell, a Vietnam vet who we learn suffers secretly from PTSD. The interweaving of characters, vocal parts, and perspective is brilliantly delivered.

Robert Spano

South Florida CLASSICAL REVIEW

May 23, 2021

New World musicians in the spotlight in short program

By Lawrence Budmen

Although the return of Robert Spano was publicized as the main focus of the New World Symphony's streamed concert on Saturday night, the longtime conductor of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and music director-designate of the Fort Worth Symphony only led two of the four scores on the abbreviated fifty-minute program. (*Octandre* by early French avant-gardist Edgar Varèse was originally scheduled but dropped from the program.) Still the works presented were all worthy, the performances uniformly excellent.

Ravel's *Introduction and Allegro* for harp, flute, clarinet and string quartet was the evening's most familiar offering. The players adroitly conveyed the music's languid aura. Leah Stevens' flute and Kelsi Doolittle's clarinet struck the perfect balance of mellow sonority with tonal gleam. Harpist Phoebe Powell deftly navigated the arpeggiated glissandos and bursts of melody. Her long cadenza near the score's conclusion was marked by superb instrumental control and finely nuanced dynamics. Violinists Yanki Karatas and Michael Turkell, violist Sam Pedersen and cellist James Churchill formed the well-balanced string contingent.

A new arrangement of *Shining Gate of Morpheus* for horn and strings by Jamaican-born, British-based composer Eleanor Alberga received its premiere. Alberga is a post-modernist composer. Her score freely mixes lyricism with a spiky edge, chromaticism and atonal murmurs. The fourteen-minute work is compelling, beautifully crafted and skillfully orchestrated. Alberga exploits the viola's dark timbre in repeated haunting solos. Scott Leger articulated the long horn lines with aplomb and displayed showmanship in the fast leaps between the instrument's registers in the concluding section. The score ends effectively with a fade out rather than a flourish. Spano brought energy and focus to the string writing. Among Arnold Schoenberg's Viennese circle, Anton Webern occupied a singular position as a sculptor of instrumental timbres. Although his body of works is small, Webern's brand of atonality is marked by delicacy and softness, combining motivic particles into sonic gems.

The Concerto for Nine Instruments (1934) is one of his finest and most intricate creations. At once moody and uplifting, this brief work brilliantly displays the color palette of the individual instruments. Spano made his early reputation as a specialist in complex contemporary scores. That expertise was fully evident in the incisive focus, transparency and definition he drew from the players. Standout solos from flutist Shantanique Moore, oboist

Joo Bin Yi and pianist Thomas Steigerwald highlighted the outstanding corporate effort.

Conducting fellow Chad Goodman has been thrust into the spotlight this pandemic season and he once again was on the the podium for Stravinsky's Suite from *L'Histoíre du Soldat* (A Soldier's Tale). Stravinsky and librettist C.F. Ramuz's play with music is a variant on the Faust parable. For the tale of a beleaguered soldier who trades his violin with the devil in return for wealth and pleasure, Stravinsky crafted a score for seven instruments that fuses indigenous Russian folk influences with neo-classism to delightful effect.

Goodman captured the irony of "The Soldier's March" and the mock heroics of "Royal March." He properly emphasized the sudden clashing dissonances in "The Devil's Dance." Margeaux Maloney's violin perfectly encapsulated the gypsy-tinged folk rhythms and bravura gymnastics. The elegance of Jesse McCandless' clarinet and spooky sound of Amelia del Cano's bassoon conjured up the lonely quietude of the "Pastorale." Percussionist Kevin Ritenauer had the last word with a flashy timpani solo in "The Triumphant March of the Devil." Goodman drew out the tart harmonics and clashing instrumental colors of Stravinsky's scoring.

Stravinsky's seven movement suite only gives a preview of this most unique among the master's theater pieces. With its high-tech lighting and video components, the New World Center would be the ideal venue for a future full staging of this opus with actors, ballet dancers and acrobats. That type of presentation would play a vital role in fulfilling the New World Symphony's mission for players and audience alike.

THE ASPEN TIMES

August 3, 2021

Shaham works his magic at the music festival

By Harvey Steiman

We know that Gil Shaham is a magician with a violin. Who knew he could control the weather, too?

A thunderous downpour began one hour before Sunday afternoon's Aspen Festival Orchestra concert at the Benedict Music Tent. Unlike most summer mountain rainstorms it persisted as the audience filed in. When he started playing Barber's sunny violin concerto the rain didn't quite stop, but the light patter on the tent roof did not intrude on his performance.

By the end of the concerto, we could not hear the rain.

He also inspired music director Robert Spano's best conducting this summer. Spano picked up Shaham's no-dawdling tempo choices in the lyrical song of the first movement, and kept things moving without rushing, which allowed the melodies to soar. Although the orchestra could have reined in the volume just a tad here and there in the first movement, the middle movement spun out in long, unhurried lines, oboist

Elaine Douvas setting the tone with the aching, arching tune.

The finale clinched a victory. The violin hardly stops during the rapid-fire toccata, and Spano had the orchestra pacing Shaham step-for-step, right up to the crisp, tight finish.

In the other major piece, Sibelius' Symphony No. 2, Spano kept tempos pushing forward through the first three movements, which paid dividends as the finale became more and more expansive. The brass section was in its glory, offering shiny harmonies that filled the tent without blaring.

Robert Spano

The Dallas Morning News

January 9, 2021

Violinist Stefan Jackiw exuded refined nobility at Fort Worth Symphony concert

Principal guest conductor Robert Spano led a chamber-orchestra version of the Fort Worth Symphony in Will Rogers Memorial Auditorium, which is about as resonant as a shoebox.

You have to feel sorry for the Fort Worth Symphony. After being kicked out of Bass Performance Hall just two weeks before its first classical concert in September, the orchestra scrambled to relocate its fall performances at Will Rogers Memorial Auditorium. This 2,800-seat hall, with its wide stage and relatively low ceilings, is about as resonant as a shoebox.But good news is on the way. Starting in March, organizations can stream and record performances in Bass Performance Hall. Live concerts with up to 100 audience members are scheduled to follow in April. For now, however, the FWSO remains in Will Rogers Auditorium.

Principal guest conductor Robert Spano, who's also the music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, led a chamber-orchestra version of the FWSO in Friday night's concert for about 450 widely spaced audience members. Bookended by two pieces for strings alone, the program centered on Prokofiev's Second Violin Concerto.

The works mostly employed traditional harmonies and structures, apart from the more dissonant sections in American composer Jennifer Higdon's "Celestial Blue" from Dance Card. Partially because of her music's accessibility, Higdon is one of the most frequently performed living composers.

Like blue cathedral, a full-orchestral work that Higdon composed in 1999 to commemorate the death of her younger brother, Andrew Blue Higdon, the eight-minute-long "Celestial Blue" contains lush and passionate textures. "Celestial Blue" differs, though, in its recurrent use of a pulsating note around which lines blossom and fade.

Higdon introduces this idea in the opening, after which the music becomes brighter and more animated. Building to a high point, wide-leaping violins shimmer and cellos and double basses make declarative statements. The work ends in a peaceful glow. Though they came across as muted in the space, the strings played with warmth and commitment.Some soloists have the ability to grab your attention and never let go. Stefan Jackiw, an American violinist of Korean and Ukrainian heritage, is one of those musicians.

From the brooding melancholy in the beginning of the Prokofiev concerto to the final fiery bursts, Jackiw exuded a refined nobility, never rushing a phrase or exaggerating a gesture. He possessed a rich and focused tone, but produced a grittier sound when needed. Jackiw also dispatched acrobatic passagework with absolute control, clearly brought out each note in double and triple stops — even in rapid sections — and spun out the silkiest of legatos in the slow movement. The audience sprang to its feet afterward.

Spano mainly conducted with compact movements, and coordinated the orchestra well with Jackiw. Separated from the rest of the orchestra by sheets of transparent plastic wrap stretched between frames, the winds and brass were even less audible than the strings.After the dark moods of the Prokofiev, Dvorak's sunny Serenade in E Major provided a refreshing change. Phrases sometimes needed more expressive shape and direction, although the ensemble lent a nice graceful lilt to folksy dances.

THE ASPEN TIMES

July 7, 2020

Fleming, Bronfman light up virtual tribute to Spano

By Harvy Steiman

Renée Fleming, singing from her living room on the East Coast, delivered the afternoon's pinnacle performance Sunday afternoon at the very end of the Aspen Music Festival's ambitious two-hour virtual celebration of Robert Spano's 10th year as music director.

Fleming, the newly minted co-director of the festival and school's Opera Theater, displayed her lush vocalism and framed her singing with pure and easily understood intentions. She delivered a ravishing reading of "Liebst du um Schönheit," a gorgeously flowing paean to love of beauty from Mahler's Rückert lieder, with Robert Ainsley providing sensitive support on piano. Fleming topped off the afternoon's proceedings with a heartfelt and musically fluent "How Can I Keep From Singing," a 19th-century hymn made popular by the likes of Pete Seeger in the 1950s and Enya in the 1990s.

The other undeniable star was pianist Yefim Bronfman, an Aspen regular. With his usual busy touring schedule canceled, he's spending the entire summer in Aspen, and he commanded the piano in Harris Hall in the event's first few musical performances.

Hearing Bronfman as accompanist was a rare treat as he lent deft playing to three Richard Strauss songs with mezzo-soprano Michelle DeYoung, and a languid piece by festival CEO Alan Fletcher with Aspen faculty artists Michael Rusinek (clarinet) and Nancy Goeres (bassoon). DeYoung's approach was more stentorian Wagner than sleek Strauss, but the last of the three songs, "Befreit," found a lyric sound to fit the music and make the song come to life. Rusinek and Goeres impressively articulated Fletcher's evocative scene-setting clarinet flourishes and bassoon melodics.

On his own for two short Chopin pieces, Bronfman offered a dry-eyed Nocturne in D-flat major Op. 27 No. 2 and followed that with a magical combination of precise articulation and rhythmic fluidity in the fairy-like Étude in F major Op. 10, No. 8.

Faces familiar to regular festival attendees provided their own performances. If they felt subdued compared with Fleming's and Bronfman's, they still had their merits.

Playing from the resonant, slightly echo-y acoustics of a performance space at his Center for Strings in Macon, Georgia, Robert McDuffie (who has been playing nearly every summer at Aspen for 40 years) applied the signature singing qualities of his violin playing to the opening movement of Brahms' Violin Sonata No. 1 in G major. Pianist Elizabeth Pridgeon accompanied, and provided the bounce for a favorite encore of his, Kreisler's Rosmarin.

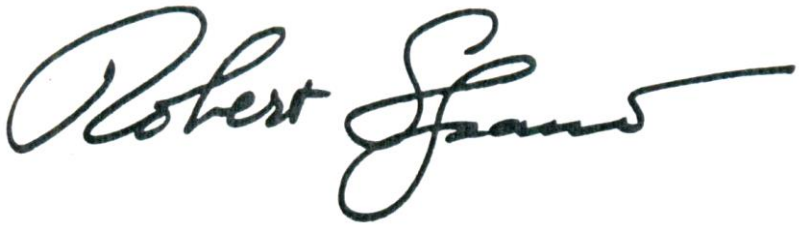
Mezzo-soprano Kelley O'Connor followed from Harris Hall with two songs in Spanish. The first, "Amor mio si muero y tù no mueres" from Peter Lieberson's "Neruda Songs," flowed nicely but seemed short on Spanish intensity. Better was an aria from "Ainadamar," Oswaldo Golijov's 2003 opera about Garcia Lorca. A more passionate, if wistful, "Desde mi ventana" reflected that O'Connor originated the role. Brian Locke accompanied.

In between these musical performances, a parade of present and past festival officials and prime donors such as Kay Buchsbaum offered personal praises of Spano, who responded in the end with gracious thank-yous and expressed disappointment that he could not share the summer making music with students and professional musicians as usual. Fletcher and artistic adviser Asadour Santourian shared a split-screen conversation with Spano about his enthusiasm for teaching. The conductor said he got bitten by the teaching bug when he needed to make money to pay for his own music lessons.

When he was appointed music director in 2011, Spano took the reins of the festival and school's conducting academy, originated by his predecessor, David Zinman. In what was billed as a surprise for Spano, all 10 winners of the academy's conducting prize got together virtually, each in their own homes or gardens, for a Zoom performance of contemporary German composer Rüdiger Ruppert's "If You've Lost Your Drums..." — a clapping and slapping piece that added genuine laughs of delight to the afternoon.

From a technical perspective the performances came off flawlessly, with the exception of those untamed echoes in Macon. There was an unexplained false start at the very beginning, and minor video-audio sync issues in some of the pre-recorded commentary between the music, including Fletchers Introduction.

The digital event kicked off a lineup of streamed performances spread over the full eight weeks of the festival's usual summer schedule. Unlike its normal calendar, jam-packed as it usually is with orchestral, chamber and vocal concerts, master classes, lectures and panel discussions, these 2020 events will be streaming only a few times per week. The festival's Facebook page and website will be offering these simultaneously.



AJC
Atlanta. News. Now.

January 17, 2020

ASO pairs 20th century magic with Beethoven concerto

By Jon Ross

For the past two decades, music director Robert Spano has honed the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra into an exacting, intensely musical ensemble capable of performing the thorniest, most difficult pieces of music with precision and an overwhelming emotional clarity.

On Thursday, the orchestra turned its focus to the individuals in the ensemble, highlighting section soloists in a pair of 20th century works — Concerto for Orchestra by Witold Lutoslawski and Oliver Knussen's "Two Organa" — and showcasing concertmaster David Coucheron in a mesmerizing performance of Beethoven's Violin Concerto. The two compositions beginning the evening even had personal resonance for the ASO and Spano. Knussen, who died in 2018, was a friend of the orchestra who appeared in Atlanta many times to conduct his own work. And in the fall of 1990, as a new addition to the Boston Symphony, Spano served as Lutoslawski's cover conductor — an understudy, in a way — when the composer came to town to conduct.

Thursday night ended with the most visible musician in the ensemble. As concertmaster, Coucheron is the musician leader of the orchestra, and during his decade in Atlanta, he has also emerged as one of the ASO's most engaging soloists; Thursday's performance was his seventh solo turn with the ASO.

During the violin concerto, luxuriant strings and an impeccable ensemble blend created an ideal platform for Coucheron, who bounded and leaped through disjunct, heady passages of notes with sparkling beauty. Listening to Coucheron perform is like hearing again from a dear friend after a short absence. And when accompanied by the orchestra, and especially during extended solo passages, Coucheron proved he has the capacity to amaze even after all these years.

Lutoslawski's Concerto for Orchestra highlighted the solo voices inside the ensemble, but also awarded ensemble players with twisting, intricate music. These intertwining melodies spanned the entire range of dynamics from deliciously quiet to deliriously loud. In the ASO's hands, slippery figures, brief snippets of sound, rose up only to give way to interactive dialogues among soloists in the orchestra.

Even the six-person bass section, tucked away at the side of the stage, enjoyed a moment in the limelight Thursday. In the final movement of the three-part concerto, the lowest strings began with a soft, yearning rumble that developed into a stage-whispered introductory call.

This hushed solo performance lasted only a minute, but the serene quiet awakened the rest of the orchestra, and the ensemble soon progressed to jarring dissonances and triple-forte trumpet blasts. The bass opening echoed a feeling in the second movement, where the string section played so softly it was like they were using mutes, creating a spectral, dangerous sound.

Despite its association with Knussen, the ASO had never presented “Two Organa” on a subscription concert. The piece is a whimsical, rhythmically striking work marked by intense syncopations and parts of the orchestra moving against each other like a series of gears. Composed of two short organa, the piece, written in 1995, burst out of its small package. Knussen based the structure on a 12th century compositional technique, using old musical ideas to create a vibrant, modern atmosphere. While the first organum opened with a simplistic, toy-box melody that was quickly deconstructed by the chamber orchestra, the second began with thick polyphony, anchored by a slow-moving melody in the low end of the orchestra. Instruments emerged from the ensemble — first a clarinet playing a jaunty figure, then an answer from a violin, singing out in elongated, assured notes — and these distinct voices moved seamlessly in and out of the ensemble.

Thursday, after an opening of 20th century music, returning from the intermission for Beethoven’s violin concerto felt a bit disorienting. The playing, and the music, sounded too decorous after a subversive first half. It’s a tribute to the ASO and Spano’s programming that by the end of the night, Beethoven sounded as forward-thinking as his compositional descendants.

Robert Spano

The Dallas Morning News

October 26, 2019

A Sea Symphony finally sails into Dallas, with a new Tsontakis violin concerto

Ralph Vaughan Williams' First Symphony was thrillingly done, but the George Tsontakis concerto failed to convince.

The Dallas Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, with guest conductor Robert Spano, perform Symphony No. 1, "A Sea Symphony" by Ralph Vaughan Williams at the Meyerson Symphony Center in Dallas, Texas on October 25, 2019

You need to hear this. You really do. With great surges and atmospheric glows of choral and orchestral sound, wrapped around the words of Walt Whitman, Ralph Vaughan Williams' *A Sea Symphony* is one of the most glorious works in the symphonic repertory. Alas, it's rarely heard on these shores, and this was its first performance by the Dallas Symphony Orchestra — 109 years after the work's premiere at England's Leeds Festival.

Led by guest conductor Robert Spano, the DSO and Dallas Symphony Chorus gave a performance alternately thrilling and enchanting Friday night. And if ever a concert hall were made for this piece, with spacious acoustics and a real pipe organ to undergird climactic moments, the Meyerson Symphony Center is it. The program also included the world premiere of American composer George Tsontakis' Violin Concerto No. 3.

Unlike, say, Beethoven in his Ninth Symphony, or Mahler in his Second and Third, Vaughan Williams keeps the chorus busy in all four movements of his hour-long symphony (his first). Whitman's texts evoke the sea, of course, and one hears it in music by turns surging, splashing, foaming and — imagining a mother on a beach — becalmed under stars and moon.

Humanity is woven into the drama, from the first movement's brave sailors to the finale's searchers for "inscrutable purpose — some hidden, prophetic intention."

In the finale, Whitman visualizes the Earth as a "vast Rondure, swimming in space!/Cover'd all over with visible power and beauty!," and Vaughan Williams evokes the distant wonders in music of exquisite sublimity. After rousing passions, with both soprano and baritone soloists and chorus urging the soul "O father, farther, farther sail," the music drifts away into nothing, like a ship disappearing on the distant horizon.

Spano has recorded the Sea Symphony with the Atlanta Symphony and Chorus, of which he's music director. (He's now also principal guest conductor of the Fort Worth Symphony.) He clearly knows this piece inside and out, paces it flawlessly, and manages the tricky balances about as well as can be done. Soprano Sarah Fox and baritone Nmon Ford weren't the most eloquent soloists, but they sang ardently, and did what they could against some challenging choral and orchestral accompaniments.

The opening brass fanfares might have been attacked a little more precisely, but in general the orchestra played gloriously. The Dallas Symphony Chorus, prepared by director Joshua Habermann, sang spectacularly, from the chills-down-the-back opening summons to atmospheric hushes. But what was with audience applause after every movement?

I wish I could summon comparable enthusiasm for the Tsontakis, a DSO commission dedicated to the memory of the late composer Christopher Rouse. Tsontakis is a prominent figure in contemporary American music, and I've admired other works of his. But, at least on first hearing, this seemed a lot of gesture and texture searching for a raison d'être.

In the first movement, free-range violin writing weaves its way through kaleidoscopic orchestral cascades, rustles and swirls; a contrasting section is agitated, even mocking. Much of the second movement — one might say too much — derives from a four-note motif heard at the start.

The orchestra has more kaleidoscopic effects before a stretch of skittering and increasingly chaotic music, with slides for the soloist and orchestral strings. An eerie quiet descends, the violin finally stringing out the song with which the work ends.

The piece was composed for Gary Levinson, the DSO's senior principal associate concertmaster, and he played with great skill and commitment. Here, too, Spano led incisively, and the orchestra presumably did what it was supposed to.

OPERA NEWS

January 2019

Marnie

New York City

THE METROPOLITAN OPERA offered the much-anticipated U.S. premiere of Nico Muhly's *Marnie* in October. Nicholas Wright's *Marnie* libretto is based on the eponymous 1961 novel by Winston Graham, which also inspired Alfred Hitchcock's 1964 film. Marnie, a clever, rebellious thief whose specialty is stealing cash from her employers, stops her crime spree when she is caught by Mark Rutland, a partner in a small family firm that Marnie has robbed. Mark forces marriage—and then, brutally, himself—upon Marnie before maneuvering her into analysis in an effort to unlock her past. Graham's book—which undoubtedly had a spike in sales from music critics within the past year—presents a compellingly canny, resourceful and chilly heroine whose sense of self-worth has been damaged in childhood.

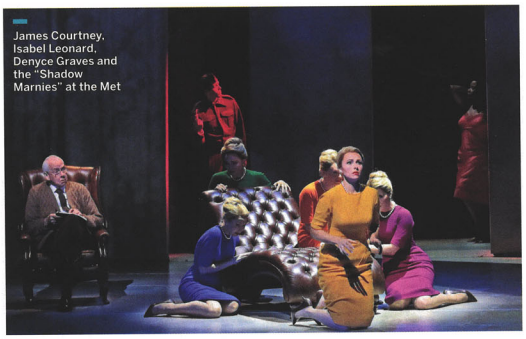
I attended the first three performances of *Marnie*'s Met run (Oct. 19, 22 and 27), and each viewing only increased my admiration for Robert Spano's taut conducting, Michael Mayer's elegantly efficient production and Isabel Leonard's serene authority in the title role. Mayer's staging looked just as good from the Met's dress circle as it did from the center orchestra: the set and projection designs by Julian Crouch and 59 Productions moved the story along with clarity and wit, abetted by Kevin Adams's crisp, pellucid lighting. Although the setting of the opera was specified as "England, 1959," Arianne Phillips's smartly tailored costumes had the bold gloss of a Hollywood film wardrobe: Marnie's chic persimmon "Balenciaga" at Mrs. Rutland's party could have passed for a movie star's gown by Jean Louis or Edith Head. Mayer's exemplary work with the cast yielded telling details of character and behavior, nowhere more cleverly than in his quietly powerful staging of Act II's scene of Marnie and Mark simultaneously dressing for a business dinner and negotiating a bargain that will change the nature of their relationship.

Leonard, an authentic beauty and an accomplished actress, dominated every scene—no easy task when playwright Wright's prolix libretto stuffed the action with as many cameo roles as a Dickens miniseries—and slipped into each of Marnie's chic ensembles with the élan of a professional model. Some of Marnie's music lies too low for Leonard's lyric mezzo-soprano, but when the vocal line allowed it—as in Marnie's final moments—Leonard shone impressively.

Spano paced the small army of supporting characters perfectly, from company veteran James Courtney, prodigiously funny as Marnie's analyst, to Met debutant Will Liverman, who deftly limned the duplicitous Malcolm Fleet. Denyce Graves boomed out the imprecations of Marnie's Mother with apt hauteur, Janis Kelly brought a touch of English frost to the unforgiving Mrs. Rutland and Jane Bunnell dug for gold and found it in the tiny part of Lucy. The quartet of doppelgängers meant to suggest Marnie's multiple identities was neatly sung by Deanna Breiwick, Dísella Lárusdóttir, Rebecca Ringle Kamarei and Peabody Southwell, although it appeared at times that Marnie was being stalked by the Lennon Sisters. Iestyn Davies sang and acted stylishly as the oily Terry Rutland, Marnie's brother-in-law, and the enigmatic Mark Rutland, Marnie's husband, was given a measure of sympathy by Christopher Maltman's incisive, well-articulated singing.

Muhly's talent, imagination and intelligence are manifest in every measure of *Marnie*; it is an abiding pleasure to hear Muhly's alluring, persuasive writing for the chorus and orchestra, which is the best of his generation. But Wright's talky, arch adaptation cruelly simplifies a complex heroine; overweighted with exposition in Act I, his libretto makes *Marnie* seem like play with background music. None of the characters sings with urgency: all of the piece's important emotional information is in the orchestral music. For all its virtues—and despite a first-rate production—*Marnie* never achieved dramaturgical lift-off.

—F. Paul Driscoll



James Courtney, Isabel Leonard, Denyce Graves and the "Shadow Marnies" at the Met

TIMES of SAN DIEGO

March 10, 2019

A Lustrous Weekend with Robert Spano and Jorge Osorio at Symphony Hall

By Barry Jagoda

The San Diego Symphony provided a splendid showcase for three great artists this past weekend, when visiting Maestro Robert Spano took up the baton to showcase world-class pianist Jorge Osorio in an exquisite performance of Beethoven's Second Concerto.

Acclaimed Mexican-born Osorio was the star Saturday night and Sunday afternoon, making the Symphony look and sound as particularly impressive as audiences have come expect. What a pleasure, then, for even after a compelling performance of the Beethoven concerto, in an encore, Osorio presented, a warming solo rendition of a short, sweet Brahms Intermezzo.

Spano, music director of the Atlanta Symphony, himself known for creating warmth among musicians and patrons, took a seat in the center of the Orchestra, becoming part of the impressed and happy audience, to enjoy this magical encore.

Thus three great shining stars: A spectacular guest conductor, a breakthrough work from the great Beethoven and the amazing Osorio, all on stage with the wonderful San Diego Symphony made for an unforgettable concert program at the Jacobs Music Center's Copley Symphony Hall.

In this context, especially, the Beethoven piece, first begun in 1785 when the composer was still a teenager but not given its premiere for another ten years, seems particularly modern. This makes sense because while, as a young composer, Beethoven had the works of Mozart in mind, he was also establishing himself as a virtuoso pianist. The emphasis in this work is just perfect for a great soloist, a role now most enjoyed worldwide by Osorio.

The entire concert program was brilliantly produced, starting with a piece from American composer Christopher Theofanidis who found "Dreamtime Ancestors," out of the wilds of Western Australia, an oratorio about Aboriginal creation myths.

An intermission followed the compelling Osorio/Beethoven production, after which Spano directed a roaring treat of Ralph Vaughn Williams Symphony No. 2: A London Symphony. Here is painted a musical portrait, bringing sights, sounds and the character of London Town to a lovely late winter weekend here in San Diego.

Patrons could not help appreciating the presence, sitting front and center, of Joan and Irwin Jacobs, the region's great philanthropists, enjoying a musical feast in very large part made possible by their contributions over the years to the cultural life of San Diego.

Robert Shaw

The New York Times

October 22, 2018

‘Marnie’ Stays in the Shadows in Nico Muhly’s Opera

By Anthony Tommasini

The mezzo-soprano Isabel Leonard, center in yellow, portrays Marnie surrounded by shadow versions of herself in Nico Muhly’s opera, his second Met commission.

In crucial moments of an opera, despite what characters on stage may be singing about, the orchestra can signal what’s really going on and suggest subliminal emotions and disguised feelings. So the composer Nico Muhly was smart to seize on Winston Graham’s 1961 novel “Marnie,” which inspired Alfred Hitchcock’s strangely stylized 1964 film, as an intriguing subject for an opera.

This story’s baffling central character is a glamorous and troubled woman in late-1950s England, who moves from job to job, changing her look and identity, compulsively embezzling money from employers. But who is she? Why does she do it? Graham’s novel is written as Marnie’s first-person narrative. Even so, the more this Marnie seems to reveal, the less you trust her voice.

Mr. Muhly’s “Marnie,” with an effective libretto by Nicholas Wright, had its much-anticipated American premiere at the Metropolitan Opera on Friday. This

is Mr. Muhly's second Met commission. ("Two Boys" opened there in 2013.) With his keen ear for unusual harmonies and eerily alluring sonorities, Mr. Muhly painstakingly tries to use his imagination — and his proven skill at orchestration — to flesh out Marnie's inner life.

But despite passages of richness, ambiguity and complexity, especially in the orchestra, the music seldom plumbs the darkest strands of this psychological drama. Mr. Muhly opted, it would seem, to maintain mystery through whole stretches of the score, to suggest emotions rather than making everything explicit. He may have held back too much. The music sometimes seems like an accompaniment to the drama, rather than a realization of it.

It starts off strongly by depicting a bustling day at the office of the accounting firm where Marnie works. The chorus sings a gaggle of overlapping phrases ("An invoice for our services," "I like your nails that color") that had an intriguingly manic feel. We first hear Marnie (the plush-voiced mezzo-soprano Isabel Leonard) exchanging meek pleasantries when introduced by her officious boss, Mr. Strutt (the clarion tenor Anthony Dean Griffey), to a self-assured client, Mark Rutland (the sturdy, suave baritone Christopher Maltman). All the while the orchestra teems with fragments of skittish lines, piercing sonorities with notes that mingle into needling dissonances, chords that unfold in halting bursts atop pulsing rhythmic figures, and ominous, heaving bass lines that sometimes seem eerily disconnected.

The best scenes in "Marnie" come when Mr. Muhly, in sync with Mr. Wright, takes creative chances. Rather than providing Marnie with any sort of tell-all aria, the opera gives her short transitional "links," as Mr. Muhly calls them, disoriented soliloquy-like passages where in broken bits of restless, leaping lines she voices bitter, confused ruminations. "What shall I be?" she sings after robbing the safe at the accounting office and deciding she must move on with a new identity. In a later link, after Mark forces a kiss upon her, she spouts disgust at his "slobbery lips," his "flickering tongue," in shards of phrases over a hurtling orchestra.

In the work's most inspired touch, Marnie is trailed during key moments by four blonde women wearing single-color office dresses, called Shadow Marnies, who encircle her, providing harmonic backdrops and sometimes melodic counterpoints to her lines. Mr. Muhly, who grew up singing in church choirs, instills these fleeting scenes with hints of early sacred music over pungently subdued writing in the orchestra.

And the shadows were crucial to another compelling scene in the office of a psychoanalyst. Earlier in the opera, after Mark catches her stealing from his office safe, Marnie agrees to marry him, seeing no way out. But frustrated that she recoils at his touch, he makes a bargain: If Marnie will see an analyst he will place a horse she owns, the only thing in life she loves, in a stable for her. In this scene, over a stretch of fraught and suspenseful music, the Shadow Marnies take turns on the analyst's couch, which proved a powerful metaphor: Don't all people reveal multiple personalities in a therapist's office?

Ms. Leonard brings a rich voice, a deceptively demure look and moments of poignant vulnerability to Marnie. Despite this, the extended scenes when Marnie interacts with her employers, her sullen and secretive mother (the mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves, back at the Met after a dozen years, and riveting), and even Mark lack dramatic definition and depth. Too many stretches of dialogue are written in a declamatory, slow-moving style that becomes ponderous.

Early in Act II, Mark has a monologue infused with wistful stretches that made me realize how few other times the score opens up lyrically. Marnie, dressing for a business dinner, is in earshot of Mark as he describes coming upon a frightened deer in a meadow. He likens the

animal's panic to the way Marnie resists him. His plaintive lines float atop undulant orchestral ripples and bucolic woodwind harmonies tweaked with clashing intervals. For a moment Mark seems not stiff and domineering, but needy and perplexed.

Mr. Muhly channels the most visceral music of his score into episodes of crude propositioning and sexual aggression that Marnie has come to expect from nearly every man she encounters. In this #MeToo cultural moment, the depicted behavior seems not a throwback to earlier times in gender relations but all too relevant.

A major offender is Terry Rutland, Mark's younger brother and his "wayward deputy" in the family business, a role for countertenor (the dynamic Iestyn Davies). Terry's defensiveness about a large red birthmark on the side of his face only fuels his boorish behavior with Marnie. After a poker game at his home, he corners Marnie, who threatens to slap him. "Do it!" Terry shouts, as the orchestra has a rare eruption of gnashing, fitful vehemence. In the final scene of Act I, Mark turns out to be ever worse. Frustrated at their sexless first week of marriage during a miserable honeymoon cruise, Mark tries to force himself on Marnie, who flees into the bathroom and slashes her wrists.

"Marnie" benefits from the director Michael Mayer's sleek and fluid staging, with inventive sets and projections designed by Julian Crouch and 59 Productions. (It was first seen last year in London for the work's premiere at the English National Opera.) Scenery changes are deftly rendered through sliding and descending panels on which evocative images are projected.

Mr. Muhly's music could not have had a better advocate than the conductor Robert Spano, making an absurdly belated Met debut at 57. He highlighted intriguing details, brought out myriad colorings, kept the pacing sure and never covered the singers. Where has he been?

Whatever one's feelings about the Hitchcock film, it was inspiring to see its star Tippi Hedren, now 88 and looking wonderful, come on stage during final ovations with the operatic Marnie at her side.

South Florida CLASSICAL REVIEW

January 14, 2018

Bronfman, Spano team up with New World Symphony for electrifying night at the Arsht Center

By Inesa Gegprifti

Saturday evening brought a display of world-class performances at the Knight Concert Hall of the Adrianne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts by pianist Yefim Bronfman and the New World Symphony conducted by Robert Spano.

The first orchestral notes of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor outline the motif that is to persist throughout the first movement. Under Spano's direction the musicians executed the lengthy introduction with absolute precision of articulation and consistent phrasing, highlighting elegantly the timbre contrasts between strings and woodwinds.

Bronfman's entrance was commanding, yet not overpowering. His approach lent itself to an overarching thoughtful interpretation; one that did not needlessly dwell on every harmonic change, but expressed the varying characters with a purity of tone and simplicity of expression. The development section of the Allegro con brio showcased Bronfman's outstanding chamber musicianship as he gracefully floated the conversational exchanges between the piano and the orchestra. The pianist's pearly trills were immediately contrasted with his thunderous arpeggios, leading to the statement of the second theme in the cadenza, which was perhaps one of the most beautiful moments of the evening.

The Largo's polar opposite key of E major radiated warmth from the first chords of the piano. Bronfman projected a sense of wonderment in the soft dynamics and the luminous, nearly childlike melodic play between the flute and bassoon further enhanced this quality.

The Rondo finale, an outburst of energy and folk-like lightheartedness, brought out the seamless transitions of sections as well as Bronfman's technical facility. Under Spano's direction, the orchestra set up the fugato section with a steady pulse and focused tone, driving the momentum all the way to the coda. The enthusiastic audience ovations were rewarded with an encore by Brofnman, a stunningly played rendering of Chopin's E major Etude (Op. 10, no. 3).

Every listener expects a powerful experience when Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5 is on the program, and Spano and the New World players did not disappoint Saturday night.

Much like Beethoven's motivic persistence, Shostakovich introduces three central gestures and obsessively builds on them. Spano's firm, yet guiding hand led the orchestra throughout the journey of this monumental work.

What starts as an unassuming figuration under a sweet melody, is later transformed into a menacing motif that ramps up to become a frightful call.

Every section of the New World Symphony lived up to the technical demands and expressive challenges of this work. The strings sustained the melodic tension and suspense, the brass resounded mightily, and the woodwinds provided warmth of tone, and the percussion aided the galloping of momentum impeccably. Even amid the dense sonorities, Spano was able to heighten the textures of each new element with great clarity.

The Scherzo, a playful movement, was projected with accurate attacks and good sense of phrasing. The division of the strings and their intense vibrato created a rich tapestry of sound in the Largo movement. Although the Fifth Symphony was Shostakovich's "redemption" in the eyes of the Soviet system, this movement, in intimate whispers and loud eruptions, is imbued with a sense of oppression.

The finale comes in with blaring outbursts as a two-sided portrayal of the intended tribute to the Soviet system. The sarcastic parodies may at times get lost in Shostakovich's epic scoring, but Spano and the New World Symphony captured these elements brilliantly and provided an unwavering rendition, adding a sense of palpable tremor beneath even the most lyrical passages.

April 4, 2017

Atlanta Symphony and Chorus steal the show at Kennedy Center's Shift Festival

By James L. Paulk

Last week, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus went to Washington D.C. for a concert and a series of related events that added up to a "residence" as part of the new Shift Festival, whose aim is to examine and upend the relationship between orchestras and their communities. Each of the four orchestras in the festival presented a concert at the Kennedy Center, surrounded and enhanced by smaller community engagements.

According to Deborah Rutter, president of the Kennedy Center, "these four orchestras have done a brilliant job of understanding who they are, where they perform and for whom they perform. Each is unique and each displays this identity they have developed through the programs they are bringing here."

The festival's name is not an acronym. Rutter says it suggests the "shift" that is occurring as orchestras move from old stereotypes to "where orchestras really are today [in terms of] the role of the orchestra in the community."

I spoke with Jenny Bilfield, president of Washington Performing Arts, which co-sponsored the festival together with the Kennedy Center. She highlighted the importance of the festival's many community events, which mirror the "connection within communities" and "the different paths the orchestras have chosen to engage with their audiences back home." Bilfield also stressed the importance of the "festival vibe" and the more casual nature of the events, so the audience isn't intimidated about "when do I clap?"

Still, it's the main stage Kennedy Center concerts that drew the most attention and audience, and here each orchestra took a totally different approach. First up was the Boulder Philharmonic (March 28), a concert I was unable to attend but which was clearly focused on the natural world. The centerpiece was a performance of Aaron Copland's "Appalachian Spring," enhanced with a group of aerial dancers who performed while dramatically suspended above the stage on ribbons and hoops. I gather the risk of a dancer being impaled on the neck of a cello added to the intrigue of the evening. Their concert also included the premiere of a mandolin concerto by Stephen Lias.

On March 29, we got the North Carolina Symphony, which brought a "Tarheel-themed" concert: each piece was inspired by the Carolinas. We heard a couple of pieces by the late Robert Ward and two recent commissions, including "Lo" by Caroline Shaw, an unusual work that explores the relationship between violin soloist and orchestra. The composer performed her own violin solos, with considerable improvisation. The program also included "Rusty Air in Carolina," an intriguing work from fast-rising composer Mason Bates, who incorporated electronic nature sounds into a paean to the Carolina countryside.

The Knights, a plucky Brooklyn chamber orchestra that refers to itself as an "orchestra collective," performed the festival finale on April 1. They were joined by the San Francisco Girls Chorus for two pieces, including "My Outstretched Hand," a deeply touching piece based on the writings of a 19-year-old Montana girl from 1902. Its composer, Lisa Bielawa, is director of the chorus. When this ensemble sang Vivaldi's *Gloria in D major*, it was one of the rare times the popular work has been sung as written: Vivaldi had composed it as an exercise for the choir of a girls' orphanage where he was working.

The ASO, which took the stage March 31 — along with its gigantic 200-voice chorus and a full complement of soloists — operates at an altogether different scale from the other three orchestras. And though this contrast was apparently intentional (the festival's organizers simply wanted to highlight a range of ensembles), the effect was dramatic, intensified both by the size of the audience (the ASO's was the only main stage concert that came close to filling the Kennedy Center's giant concert hall) and by the ASO's decision to stage its blockbuster 2014 commission, "Creation/Creator" by Christopher Theofanidis.

Revived at Symphony Hall in recent weeks and reviewed by *ArtsATL* at its premiere as well as the revival, "Creation/Creator" is an immersive and reflective work whose examination of the creative process makes it a metaphor for the ASO's stellar leadership in terms of new works.

Another virtue of Theofanidis's masterpiece is that it shows off the ASO's unique asset, its mighty chorus. In a backstage chat during the Washington rehearsal, Evans Mirageas,

the orchestra's suave spokesman and strategist, described them as "the finest amateur chorus in America." This might be a rare case of understatement: I think if you deleted the word "amateur," the description would still hold. But Mirageas was making an important point: they do this for no pay.

"Creation/Creator" is a challenging work for everyone involved, and on this occasion orchestra and chorus were clearly on fire. Robert Spano, ASO's music director, shaped the giant work nicely and gave it a sweeping momentum. It was a happy night all around, especially for the large contingent of "road trip groupies" who made the trek from Atlanta to cheer their beloved orchestra.

On the previous night, the seven vocal soloists from "Creation/Creator" were featured in a dandy concert at the palatial and resonant National Gallery of Art. Each chose a few songs related to the creation theme, with Spano accompanying them on piano. The decision to let each of these articulate singers introduce their choices had the effect of humanizing them. Baritone Nmon Ford sang his own original composition, "Dov'è l'amore," a sweet neo-romantic work that showed off his voice well. Soprano Jessica Rivera sang a cycle of three potent German lieder written specifically for her by Spano, showcasing her expressive talent.

On Saturday, the final morning, Spano and Norman MacKenzie, ASO director of choruses, led a conducting workshop for area choral directors, joined by volunteers from the ASO Chorus.

Asked about the impact of being chosen for this festival, Spano responded, "For us, it's a confirmation of identity. We pride ourselves in doing interesting things, or familiar things in interesting ways . . . exploring the new and different. It's significant that what we do on a regular basis is of interest to the Shift Festival. We try to engage where we live with the variety of what we do, recognizing that we have multiple audiences . . . traveling around the state, but also offering different things that bring different audiences and communities to us."

It costs the earth to move such a large ensemble to Washington, even if a portion of the cost was covered by foundations and by [drumroll please!] the National Endowment for the Arts. I asked ASO bassist Michael Kurth about the value to the orchestra of playing on a major road trip like this one. He responded, "It always raises our game. When we're preparing for a big out-of-town audience at a venue as legendary as the Kennedy Center, it feels that our stature worldwide is heightened and it elevates our esteem. It's an honor to be invited here, and to be considered innovative and influential."

This was actually the orchestra's sixth visit to the Kennedy Center. Perhaps the most auspicious was for President Jimmy Carter's inauguration in 1977, when Robert Shaw led the orchestra and chorus, joined by the National Symphony Orchestra, in a concert that *Washington Post* critic Paul Hume called "the greatest inaugural concert in history." Commenting on the chorus, he added: "If the rest of the country could sing the way these people from Georgia sing, Jimmy Carter's problems would be over before he gets started."

This trip took the place of what more recently had become the orchestra's annual trip to Carnegie Hall. From my conversation with Mirageas, it appears the orchestra won't be performing outside the South in the 2017–18 season. But he let slip that another trip to Carnegie is in the works for a future year, featuring something "really big."

LIMELIGHT
AUSTRALIA'S CLASSICAL MUSIC AND ARTS MAGAZINE

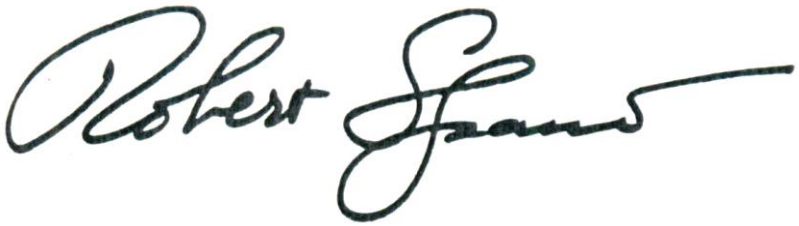
April 20, 2017

Elgar's Cello Concerto (Sydney Symphony Orchestra)

By Philip Scott

In this concert of 20th Century English music the SSO shone, not only as soloists but in terms of the sections. Strings (with the additional extra violins necessary for these expansive works), winds and brass achieved a well-nigh perfect blend, not just within the section itself but also across the whole tapestry of sound. This is a compliment to their musicianship, and also to guest conductor Robert Spano, who has been Music Director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra since 2001. In that capacity, Spano has made several recordings of music by Vaughan Williams (including Symphonies Nos. 1 and 4), indicating that he is something of a specialist in that composer's music. It shows. The concert began with Oliver Knussen's The Way to the Castle Yonder, three brief orchestral excerpts form his opera (based on books by Maurice Sendak), Higglety Pigglety Pop! Knussen, whose father Stuart was for decades the Principal double bass in the London Symphony Orchestra, writes in a sparing, pointillist manner that beguiles the ear. Sendak's world of mythical fearsome creatures is beautifully conveyed. The music has something of a Harry Potter quality, although this work precedes the Harry Potter films. Orchestral balance was exquisite, setting a standard that continued to be met throughout the remainder of the concert. This was particularly true of the second half, which was entirely occupied by Vaughan Williams' Fifth Symphony. Among his symphonies the Fifth is the most evocative with genuine moments of grandeur, possibly because some of the music was borrowed from the composer's opera The Pilgrim's Progress (based on John Bunyan's Christian allegory). This music is more difficult to play than may appear because virtually every part is doubled. Again, a strong orchestral blend is of paramount importance. The gossamer textures of the Scherzo showed this off beautifully, as did the opening of the slow movement where the floating string chords supporting Alexandre Oguey's sublime cor anglais were literally breathtaking. Spano's affinity with Vaughan Williams was evident in his ability to shape the ebb and flow of the music over long spans. This conductor always kept the big picture in mind. The solo part in Elgar's Cello Concerto was played by the young Dutch cellist Harriet Krijgh. Though her tone is not as full as some of the great cellists who have essayed this work (notably Jacqueline Du Pre, whom she somewhat resembles in looks), her pitch was sure and she projected the solo line strongly into the house. This late work contains a

built-in strain of melancholy that was never over-emphasised in Krijgh's rendition: she produced a line of seamless lyrical beauty in the first movement, great delicacy and immaculate control in the scherzo (matched by the orchestra), then more openly heartfelt phrasing in the slow movement and the concerto's touching coda. It was an impressive performance that will only grow more personal and deeply felt with time. Spano and the orchestra's contribution proved a great asset; to take just one instance, they made a sharp point of Elgar's offbeat accented chords in the finale. Overall, this was not just a fascinating program but a genuine showcase for the orchestra, and a wonderful introduction to an expressive young cellist.



February 11, 2017

Robert Spano leads a resplendent Mahler 1 in Atlanta

By William E. Ford

Early in my career, the joke was “Here comes the boss… look busy!” The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra's Music Director, Robert Spano, returned last evening to conduct *his* Orchestra. Not only did the ASO musicians look busy, but they played superbly, sounding ever so much like a “world-class ensemble”, an appellation to which they aspire. With Spano on the podium, it seems to have a focus and shared sensibility about the music being played, and all sections of the orchestra are on their best musical behavior. The Maestro seems to inspire a respect and an obligation to perform well among the musicians that sometimes is not always apparent with guest conductors. Furthermore, Spano never seems to provide less than a fully competent interpretation of most works, and often he is inspired, as in this performance.

The piano soloist in the Beethoven Fourth Piano Concerto was 36-year-old Juho Pohjonen, a native of Finland, in his third solo turn with the ASO. This frequent pairing may explain why conductor and pianist seemed so in sync. The first movement of the concerto, which is about half of the length of the entire work, is a wonderful example of the composer’s ability to create a theme and develop it so that it returns in various creative and compelling ways. The second movement is a heartfelt and deeply moving dialogue between the strings of the orchestra and piano. The third movement arises directly out of the second without break and develops into a bold and energetic rondo section. Pohjonen is not prone to histrionics and he coaxed a wonderfully clean and clear sound from the piano, which underscores the music’s structure. His playing was refined and controlled, without producing a large sound which was not required in this elegant and refined performance. The soloist and conductor were thoughtful in their choice of tempi in the second movement; they resisted the temptation to slow it down simply to heighten drama and melancholy. The finale was sharp and generated plenty of excitement, but it was never excessive, in keeping with the thoughtful and greatly appreciated restraint of this performance. As an encore, Mr Pohjonen played the challenging and whimsical *Butterfly* from Grieg’s *Lyric Pieces*.

The final work on the program was Mahler’s First Symphony, sometimes called “Titan”, a title quickly discarded by the composer. It’s difficult today to fully appreciate the effect the first performance of the symphony had on

Austrian audiences in 1888. Mahler originally described the work as a symphonic poem in two parts, but discarded the Blumine movement to create a traditional four-movement symphonic form. Mahler wanted his music to portray events of daily life – the sounds of nature, bird calls – yet by 1900 the composer chose to eliminate any programmatic descriptions for the symphony because he felt that by having them, he was misleading the public. At the time, critics and audiences were perplexed by this new approach to the symphony and some wanted the notes, others did not. The score calls for a very large orchestra, and the orchestra was augmented with contract musicians to bring it to the required size. As has been the case in other programs, the ASO under Maestro Spano seems to thrive on Mahler. In this performance, every section of the orchestra was focused, intonation was almost perfect, and the precision of playing, especially in the strings, was remarkable. The extraordinary woodwinds were exceptionally strong, as was the brass section, including six French horns. The off-stage trumpets at the beginning of the symphony were well-rehearsed. Spano paid careful attention to each movement's dynamics as well as those of the entire work so that the overall arc of the music was never lost.

This was a grand performance of a grand work by an orchestra and conductor that proved they are a grand Mahler ensemble. This may have been their best concert so far this season.

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

November 26, 2016

SLSO presents a perfect program for a holiday weekend

By Sarah Bryan

It's always interesting at performances of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra to check the program to note the last time a particular work was performed here. Sometimes the information is surprising.

In this weekend's program at Powell Symphony Hall, for example, the promoted piece — Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat minor, the "Emperor" — was most recently given in 2014.

It's a masterpiece, of course, and deserves its frequent hearings; no complaints here.

The other two compositions, although familiar to anyone who tunes into classical radio stations on a regular basis, were new, or almost new, to the SLSO.

Both were tone poems from the early 20th century, "Pohjola's Daughter," a 1906 piece by Jean Sibelius, and Ottorino Respighi's "Fontane di Roma (Fountains of Rome)," from 1917.

Guest conductor Robert Spano, music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, hasn't been here since 2010. One of the best in the business, he made a welcome return.

So did Stephen Hough. Hough is simply one of the finest pianists of the age; on his journey through the "Emperor," he seemed to be channeling Beethoven.

He listens to his colleagues and plays with an astounding range, from gossamer delicacy to assertive strength, his hands skimming over the keyboard and bringing out the heart of the music.

The conclusion of the first movement drew strong applause and rightly so. At the concerto's end, the response was overwhelming. There were persistent calls for an encore that were not, unfortunately, answered.

Spano seemed to have a fine rapport with both his soloist and the orchestra. The tempos were all spot-on in a performance to cherish in every way.

The Sibelius received its SLSO premiere on Friday night, while the Respighi hadn't been heard here since 1974.

Both are strong works; taken altogether, the relatively brief program (less than two hours in all) was filled with good choices for a holiday weekend.

For "Pohjola," Sibelius turned to a favorite source, the "Kalevala." This section of the Finnish epic deals with a hero who falls in love with a mysterious maiden who sets him seemingly unachievable tasks in order to win her hand.

Unfortunately for him, they really are impossible, and he finally gives up in despair.

It's filled with the kind of depiction of icy Nordic haze for which Sibelius is known, with ominous moments and a big brassy motif for the hero, before a quiet conclusion. Spano and the orchestra made a strong case for the

piece, which surely won't need another 110 years for a second hearing here.

"Fountains" is the first of Respighi's well-wrought trio of Roman tone poems. It conjures up a quartet of famous fountains, each at a different time of day, describing nature and mythology beautifully and effectively.

Spano started it out a little loudly, but otherwise gave it a satisfying reading and a sublime ending. (Note to the premature applauder in the audience: Don't clap until the conductor puts his hands down.)

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
ajc.com

September 9, 2016

‘Cloth Field’ pairs Atlanta Symphony’s Spano with dancers

By Andrew Alexander

A couple dozen chandeliers of wildly different styles hang from the ceiling of Goodson Yard, a former warehouse space at the Goat Farm Arts Center, providing a curious touch of the baroque to a performance that’s otherwise almost entirely given over to a sort of naked minimalism.

“Cloth Field,” a collaboration between Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Music Director Robert Spano and Lauri Stallings, artistic director of Atlanta dance company Glo, is a sometimes confounding, often compelling evening-length work for five female dancers that

features Spano performing his own piano composition.

Spano occasionally leaves the piano to move with the dancers: Viewers accustomed to seeing the maestro tuxedoed at the podium at Symphony Hall will be surprised to find him here in a black kilt, making intriguingly strange semaphoric gestures with his batonless hands in a hall that's evocatively silent. It's a very different task from the usual, one supposes, but he brings a remarkably similar sense of concentration and soberness to both (such moments actually end up ranking among the evening's most intensely and quietly dramatic).

Spano's composition itself is unapologetically beautiful, though a listener quickly discovers that its lovely surface, with its spaciously meditative exploration of simple melodic lines and its cool lingering on uncomplicated scales, undulating trills and triads, is undergirded by a sense of things troubled and unsettled. There are even surprising touches of the sinister in the opening of the second half, for which Spano, fittingly enough, moves to a new piano on the other side of the performance space.

Dancers give vivid life to the prismatic and many-mooded composition, though in the performance's first half, movements and tableaux — especially synchronous group movements — develop too quickly and lurch with disconcerting speed from one idea to the next.

Paradoxically, the moments of stripped-down tranquility, even stillness, which appear primarily in the second half of the work, become the moments most suffused with fascinating detail.

Lifts and carries are undoubtedly some of the most delightfully inventive elements of the dance. There's a playful sense of curiosity, bordering on awe, about the myriad and often strange ways one body can support another. Especially memorable is when two dancers lift a third so she can momentarily walk — nearly weightless — on the broad, flattened back of another, but there are many such moments.

In the end,"Cloth Field" is refreshingly gentle and meditative, rather than declamatory and exhibitive. Its bare-boned moods and movements are fleeting, often frustratingly elusive, but isn't that the very nature of a dream?

The New York Times

May 2, 2016

Premieres, a Tribute and an Anniversary at Carnegie Hall

By Anthony Tommasini

The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra made its Carnegie Hall debut in 1971, four years after Robert Shaw had taken charge as music director.

Mr. Shaw, who died in 1999 at 82, would lead the Atlanta Symphony a dozen times at Carnegie Hall during his acclaimed 21-year tenure with the orchestra.

So, it was appropriate that on Saturday night, the exact day of hiscentennial, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, conducted by the music director Robert Spano, paid tribute to Mr. Shaw with a program offering impressive performances of Jonathan Leshnoff's "Zohar," in its New York premiere, and Brahms's "A German Requiem," a score Mr. Shaw revered.

The orchestra has made fairly regular appearances at Carnegie over the years, unlike the Utah Symphony which, before Friday night, had not performed at the hall in 41 years. After a financially precarious period in recent times, worsened by the recession, that orchestra has been on a roll. Under the dynamic leadership of Thierry Fischer, now in his seventh season as music director, the ensemble has been attracting audiences, donors and crucial government support. For this concert, the orchestra's 75th anniversary, the mood in the hall was celebratory. Gary Herbert, the governor of Utah, as well as Mitt Romney attended. Crews from two Utah television stations came to report the big news. The inspired players excelled in an ambitious program that featured the New York premiere ofAndrew Norman's "Switch," one of several recent Utah Symphony commissions.

The concert began with a fresh, lively account of Haydn's Symphony No. 96 in D ("Miracle"). The stage was already set up, however, for Mr. Norman's piece, a percussion concerto, with dozens of instrument of all kinds arranged in two groups on either side of the conductor's podium.

Like "Split," Mr. Norman's piano concerto that received its premiere in December by the New York Philharmonic, "Switch" explores nonlinear, narrative-scrambling techniques borrowed from video games. His restless music gurgles and explodes in often fragmented phrases, leaping breathlessly from one thing to another.

"Switch" actually begins calmly, until slicing chords startle you. Only after the piece had been going for a minute or so did the percussion soloist, Colin Currie, sneak onstage and pick up mallets. The piece unfolded with bouts of frenetic activity, volleys of percussion and gnashing chords. As the title "Switch" suggests, the soloist's riffs are like triggers, turning other players on and off, including other percussion in the rear.

This technique of quick cuts could easily result in just jumbles of sounds and rhythms. But the pitches Mr. Norman piles up came across as precisely chosen for their astringent beauty and impact. Also, stretches of subdued, if taut, music provided relief from the frenzy. Mr. Currie brought stunning virtuosity and tireless energy to the solo part, which required him to dash constantly among groups of instruments onstage.

Perhaps wanting to make up for lost decades of playing Carnegie, Mr. Fischer and the orchestra played two demanding early 20th-century works after intermission: selections from Prokofiev's "Romeo and Juliet," and Bartok's Suite from "The Miraculous Mandarin." Both received exciting, colorful and fervent performances.

For the Atlanta program, Mr. Leshnoff, 42, wrote a 30-minute choral work, "Zohar," scored, as with the Brahms requiem, for soprano and baritone soloists, chorus and orchestra. The text for "Zohar" — a pillar of Jewish mysticism, the composer suggests — is a commentary upon the Five Books of Moses, here presented as six movements reflecting on the nature of man, Judaism and life.

Mr. Leshnoff has been called a leader of the contemporary American lyricism, though Neo-Romantic would be a simpler description of his stylistic approach in "Zohar." The opening movement was somewhat pontifical, with ominous, weighty orchestral chords and repeated choral exclamations. I was more drawn into the reflective, poignant sections of the score, like "What is Man?," when piercing harmonies and delicate orchestral textures cushioned supple, lyrical writing for the fine soprano soloist, Jessica Rivera. Another movement, about a shepherd boy who cannot read, began with tender music for the baritone, here the earnest, youthful Nmon Ford, and built to a pummeling outburst for the full forces. If not innovative, "Zohar" revealed the composer's technical skills and personal voice.

Shaw, who founded the Atlanta Symphony's volunteer chorus in 1970, would have been proud of the remarkable contribution the choristers made to the Brahms requiem performance. Their sound was full-bodied, warm and penetrating without ever seeming forced. Inner details of the music came through with clarity and crispness. Ms. Rivera and Mr. Ford sang affectingly. Mr. Spano drew a glowing, spacious performance of this Brahms masterwork from the orchestra, marking a great return visit for both him and this essential ensemble.

Robert Shaw

ARTSATL

May 3, 2016

The Shaw 100th: ASO makes it a night to remember at sold-out Carnegie Hall

By James L. Paulk

In a programming coup, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra showed up at Carnegie Hall on April 30, the exact 100th birthday of Robert Shaw, the man who did so much to shape the orchestra and who built its chorus into an international phenomenon. On the program was Brahms' magnificent *German Requiem*, with which Shaw was clearly obsessed.

Shaw twice conducted the *German Requiem* here at Carnegie, in 1990 and again in 1997, both times with the renowned Orchestra of St. Luke's. The first of these visits was the grand finale of the first of his choral workshops, which became a regular feature at Carnegie for nearly a decade. The 1997 sojourn showcased the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Chorus. That concert took place on the 100th anniversary of Brahms' death. It was to be Shaw's final performance of the Requiem; he died in 1999.

Shaw's 1983 Telarc recording of the Requiem with the ASO and its chorus, joined by the immortal soprano Arlene Auger and the fine baritone Robert Stilwell as soloists, survives as one of his, and the orchestra's, most significant contributions.

In the years after Shaw, the orchestra has come under the influence of two powerful forces. Yoel Levi, who followed

him, brought a new level of precision to the orchestra and gave it a signature sound, anchored by burnished woodwinds. Then came Robert Spano, who brought the orchestra a swashbuckling image and cemented its reputation.

Through it all, Norman Mackenzie, who worked as Shaw's assistant, guarded the legacy of the chorus using Shaw's unique techniques to sustain the chorus's special qualities.

Though this concert is ostensibly all about Shaw, it is also an opportune time to assess the orchestra and chorus, his greatest legacy. The last few years have been rather stormy with budget cuts, two lock-outs and a drastic shrinkage in the orchestra's complement (the number of permanent players), followed by a truce late in 2014 which restored some, but not yet all, of the cuts.

Reviewing a 2010 ASO performance of the Requiem, I remarked, "The ASO Chorus seems to have been created by God especially to sing the Brahms *German Requiem*." That is still the case. It is a work that showcases the chorus's special qualities: its astonishing unity; its total dynamic range, from whispered pianissimos to thundering fortes; and the unique lack of vibrato, especially from the Sopranos, that gives it such tonal purity.

The 2010 performance was led by principal guest conductor Donald Runnicles and marked a vivid contrast to Shaw's version: opulent and spacious compared to the stormy, energetic approach of Shaw.

At this concert, Spano's approach was closer to Runnicle's in its pacing. Spano gave the work an elegiac, sometimes ponderous feel. An intense sadness ran through the performance, along with a sense of majesty. Well, it is a requiem, after all. Whatever you might feel about the drawn out tempi, one effect was to fully expose both orchestra and chorus. With less gifted forces, the approach would not have worked. But here it seemed to affirm their exalted status. Spano's phrasing was exemplary. He accelerated artfully into satisfying crescendos in the second movement ("For all flesh is as grass") and the joy at the return of "the ransomed of the Lord" was complete.

I don't think it's heresy to say this on Shaw's centenary, but to my ear both chorus and orchestra sound better today than at any point in the Shaw era. Shaw was, first and foremost, a teacher, and the ultimate compliment one can pay him is that his students and successors, especially Mackenzie, have built on his extraordinary legacy to the point that they have surpassed his own efforts. The chorus may be stronger than ever, but its central qualities are a testament to Shaw's vision and a direct result of his drills. The orchestra, more polished and precise from the work of Levi and Spano, is a thrilling legacy.

Experiencing this singular Requiem with Spano and the ASO forces is an immersive, strangely peaceful experience, regardless of your view of spirituality. Both Jessica Rivera, the soprano soloist, and Nmon Ford, the baritone, have distinctive tremulous voices that contrast nicely with the smooth surfaces of the ASO chorus. Rivera, who has become Spano's "go to" soprano, is a joy to watch, her beatific gaze reinforcing the gentle, unforced sound that projects so wonderfully across the hall.

The Brahms can easily stand on its own, and usually does. But ASO's planners decided to go overboard with this one night stand, throwing in a full-length commission. The new work, "Zohar," by Jonathan Leshnoff, was written to take advantage of the same forces as the Requiem, right down to the soloists. With all this freight — the Shaw centennial, the Brahms, the Carnegie trip — this could easily have turned into a pretentious mess. Instead, the result is

an attractive and joyous compliment to the evening.

Like Shaw, Spano has a special affection for new music, which he programs regularly. These are almost always safe neo-Romantic composers like Leshnoff.

A cantata, this work is based on the "Zohar," which the program notes tell us is "a commentary on the Pentateuch" (the five books of Moses). The texts for three of the six movements come directly from the Zohar and are clearly hymns of praise, using exalted language and music that borders on the ponderous. The other sections "explore the human side," and these are simpler and more joyous. Ford, the baritone, got the most interesting segment, about the answered prayer of a mere shepherd boy.

Everything sounds better in Carnegie Hall, in this case, at capacity, the audience bolstered by a healthy contingent of Atlantans: the "away game" crowd of hardcore fans. It was easy to spot them — they're the ones who abruptly jumped to their feet at the end of every piece.

The Carnegie visit is always a special occasion, but this was singular because of the Shaw focus and the Brahms. Saturday also saw the New York premiere of the *Robert Shaw: Man of Many Voices* documentary at the Paley Center for Media here in New York. The film was produced by Kiki Wilson, herself an ASO Chorus member.

This trek, an ASO ritual, showcases the orchestra here in the nation's music capital. Atlantans are proud of their orchestra, and this is its biggest chance to show off. New York gets an annual parade of orchestras from all over the world, all here for the same purpose. An exalted few (Boston, London, Vienna, Chicago, and Philadelphia, for example) stick around for a few days or a week for a mini-residence, always featuring their best chops.

The New York Times

September 21, 2015

A 'Resurrection' in Tune With an Orchestra's Renewal

JAMES R. OESTREICH
MUSIC REVIEW

ATLANTA — Prescient as Mahlerians like to think their hero was, Mahler could not have imagined how useful his "Resurrection" Symphony would become in 21st-century America, with orchestra after orchestra emerging from a near-death crisis of one sort or another.

The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra performed the work on Thursday evening at the Woodruff Arts Center, conducted by its music director, Robert Spano, to open its 71st season a year after its 70th was delayed and then shortened by a two-month lockout of the players by management, a hard-fought conflict that left bitterness in its wake. (Also on Thursday, the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra used the "Resurrection" Symphony to open its 25th-anniversary season with a return to its home, the Orpheum Theater in New Orleans, restored since the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina a decade ago.) What better work to proclaim renewed health and summon new confidence?

Especially if you have a chorus like that of the Atlanta Symphony to sing the glory of the finale. The volunteer chorus — a 200-voice gem founded in 1970 by Robert Shaw, the orchestra's music director from 1967 to 1988, and maintained by its current chorusmaster, Norman Mackenzie — was superb, from its first hushed utterances to its final rousing shouts.

Yet the Mahler, which ideally demands an orchestra of 100 or more, was not an obvious choice for an ensemble still depleted from an earlier lockout, in 2012. Along with pay cuts and a shortened season, the terms of that settlement reduced the number of musicians from 95 to 88; with further attrition, that number now stands at 77.

JEFF ROFFMAN

Atlanta Symphony Orchestra *Robert Spano conducting on opening night at the Woodruff Arts Center.*

So Mr. Spano was leading an orchestra consisting of perhaps 20 percent extras. But it sounded whole, with strong, cohesive, often subtle playing.

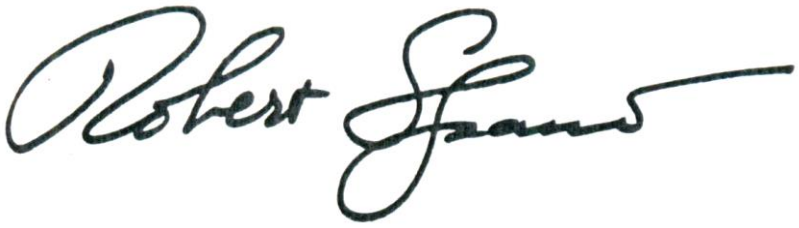
This was the rare Mahler performance from which you came away repeatedly impressed as much by pianissimos, fading almost imperceptibly into silence, as by fortissimos. Not that the brasses, a particular strength of this orchestra in recent years, were anything less than mighty and brilliant.

This was indeed a performance that seemed to look more to the future than to the immediate past. The four-year contract agreed to last year calls for annual step-ups in personnel, to reach 88 by its end, and a 6 percent pay increase over that period.

Stanley Romanstein, who became the orchestra's president in 2010, resigned during the 2014 lockout, and Terence L. Neal, its interim president, has drawn almost universal praise for his rebuilding of the ensemble's prospects and morale. A new president was recently named. She is Jennifer Barlament, the general manager of the Cleveland Orchestra, who will take over gradually this year, and optimism seems widespread.

The new season, meanwhile, looks to a distant past, celebrating the 2016 centenary of Robert Shaw with several of his choral specialties, including Britten's "War Requiem," Beethoven's "Missa Solemnis" and Brahms's "German Requiem," which it will perform in Carnegie Hall on April 30, Shaw's 100th birthday.

After a workout of a season, the fabled chorus should arrive in rare form.



StarTribune

November 19, 2015

Minnesota Orchestra presents the impassioned 'Neruda Songs'

Mezzo-soprano Kelley O'Connor and conductor Robert Spano join Minnesota Orchestra for the “Neruda Songs.”

By Michael Anthony

The “Neruda Songs” by the late Peter Lieberson, which the Minnesota Orchestra is performing this week, have been acclaimed the most important — and arguably the most sensuously beautiful — works for solo voice and orchestra to be composed in this century.

The songs are settings of five sonnets by Chilean poet Pablo Neruda that deal, in the composer’s words, with “different faces of love,” the final one being the inevitability of parting through death.

Lieberson composed the songs in 2005 for his wife, the much-admired mezzo-soprano Lorraine Hunt Lieberson. The intent was for her to sing them, which she did, in high-profile performances in Los Angeles and Boston, and then record them.

The extra resonance to this was that Hunt Lieberson was battling breast cancer at the time of the premiere, and just a year later the illness took her life at age 52. A line from one of the poems seemed prophetic: “My love, if I die and you don’t, let’s not give grief an even greater field.” Five years later, Lieberson died from complications of lymphoma.

It was possible that these songs, having been hatched with a particular voice in mind — a distinctive one in the case of Hunt Lieberson — might not be taken up by other singers. However, Robert Spano, music director of the Atlanta Symphony and a champion of new music, put together his own recording of the Neruda songs, using that orchestra and a rising young American mezzo, Kelley O’Connor, who studied the songs with Lieberson while he was undergoing chemotherapy in Hawaii.

Happily, Spano and O’Connor have been engaged for the concerts at Orchestra Hall. Thursday morning’s performance was one of almost startling illumination and poignancy. O’Connor seemed to have thought through every nuance and shade of meaning in these evocative texts and the settings that Lieberson created for them, and yet the performance sustained a feeling of spontaneity and an intimacy not easily achieved in this hall. (Wisely, translations of the poems appeared as surtitles above the stage as the performance progressed.)

Hunt Lieberson’s recording on Nonesuch (taped live in Boston) will always be cherished, but there was a freshness and flexibility to O’Connor’s singing — the strong, clear high notes, for instance, in the first song — that the older singer couldn’t quite realize. O’Connor also captured the urgency in the third song (“Will you come back? Will you leave me

here, dying?"), and the tone of the final song, the one that most recalls Richard Strauss, ending in a state of tranquility with a repetition of the word "amor," was positively radiant.

Spano displayed an easy command of the score's varied and complicated textures — the "sultry" and "languid" qualities the composer asks for — and its subtle rhythms. (Some percussion effects in the bossa-nova movement, the fourth, were a little too soft.)

The second half was devoted to Tchaikovsky's familiar Symphony No. 6, "Pathetique." Spano's reading was amply emotional without turning sentimental, and he drew a fine performance from the orchestra: a big, growling sound from the trombones and admirable momentum in the third movement.

THE ASPEN TIMES

July 7, 2015

Let's hear it for orchestras that listen during Aspen Music Fest

By Harvey Steiman

Hearing familiar music such as the well-loved works of Beethoven, Brahms and Tchaikovsky on kickoff weekend for the Aspen Music Festival allows us to focus on just how good the musicians are who are playing it. For both the Aspen Chamber Symphony, which played on Friday, and the Aspen Festival Orchestra, which played Sunday, the answer is "pretty darn good."

These orchestras, where students play alongside principals who spend the rest of the year in major symphony orchestras and chamber groups, formed only early last week. And yet evident in both ensembles was a palpable sense of unity, of consciously listening to one another intently, the better to bring more nuance and expression to the music.

The season's first orchestra concert Friday found the Chamber Orchestra focused on Beethoven in a performance of extraordinary refinement from beginning to end. Energetic conductor Nicholas McGegan found a balance between precision and warmth in the sunny Symphony No. 4, and pianist Anton Nel's crystalline and nuanced work brought the oft-disregarded Piano Concerto No. 1 to vivid life.

McGegan established a vigorous but appealingly deft style for Beethoven in the opening "King Stephen" overture, but it was the concerto where everything came together. Both soloist and conductor matched a sense of buoyancy. The music unfolded like a silk scarf, ebbing, flowing, fluttering, studded with jewels of iridescent phrases from Nel every time the piano entered. The cadenza, the shortest and least flamboyant of the three Beethoven wrote, sneaks in quietly after the sustained chord in the orchestra. Nel let it grow and spread organically before receding into the final page of the first movement.

The largo moved with grace and had the nuanced feel of chamber music; Burt Hara's quiet clarinet draped a lovely veil over the piano's wanderings. The finale, almost Haydnesque in its joyousness, veritably skipped through to its conclusion.

The symphony romped with similar glee. Even the slow introduction avoided too much foreboding before establishing a fleet pace, a true Allegro vivace, that never waned. The complex filigrees that ornament the rapturous second movement never revved things up too much, and the wit that infuses the third-

movement minuet arrived with a wink, not a guffaw. The finale brought things home in euphoric style.

”Scheherazade,” Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov’s colorful treatment of the Arabian classic “A Thousand And One Nights,” opened Sunday’s Festival Orchestra program with wonderfully expansive, controlled playing from all hands. Pianist Inon Barnaran followed that with a dry-eyed yet expressive rendition of Tchaikovsky’s heart-on-sleeve Piano Concerto No. 1, among the most popular of piano-and-orchestra works.

One of the glories of this “Scheherazade” performance was the recurring violin theme associated with the title character. David Coucheron, in the concert master’s chair, spun them with limpid tone, punctuated by glissandos and chords stunningly articulated by harpist Anneleen Lenaerts, new this year from the Vienna Philharmonic. Rimsky’s kaleidoscopic orchestration brings all the principal players into the spotlight at one time or another. Most memorable were Elaine Douvas’ plaintive oboe, Nadine Asin’s sultry low-range flute and John Zirbel’s high-elevation French horn. The filigree of cellist Desmond Hoebig’s run at the Scheherazade theme also contributed. The entire brass managed to be sonorous and present without a hint of blare and the percussion seasoned the score without overpowering it, especially the insistent pulse of David Herbert’s tympani.

Conductor Robert Spano brought out the music’s shifting colors and pulsings with well-judged intensity, and drew deft balances throughout. Broad-beamed pieces such as this are right in this conductor’s wheelhouse.

As fully realized as this performance was, the Tchaikovsky concerto might have benefited from another rehearsal or two. The broad outlines were there, to be sure. Softer, more lyrical passages were especially fine, especially Barnatan’s caress of the second movement’s tune, first offered by Nasin’s flute. But details too often missed. Entrances after pauses or tempo shifts repeatedly needed an additional measure or two to synchronize. For his part, the soloist tended to rush complex passages, and moments of denser texture could have used more clarity. Things fell into place better in the finale, finishing with a welcome rush.

To open the season Thursday in the smaller Harris Hall, festival favorites cellist David Finckel and pianist Wu Han assayed cello sonatas by Bach, Beethoven, Brahms and Rachmaninov. Their smart programming mined musical interconnections. In a charming talk to begin the second half, Wu Han noted that the “three B’s” sonatas all consciously take their cues from Bach’s counterpoint, for example. Each one even prominently features a fugue.

Finckel displayed his flair for singing melody. He seemed most at home in the romantic gestures of the Brahms Sonata No. 1 in E minor and the more extroverted passages in the long Rachmaninov sonata. Both musicians favored a warm, legato approach to the Bach Sonata No. 1 in G major, which minimized differences between the baroque and romantic styles, almost to a fault.

The pianist preceded the expansive Rachmaninov sonata with a set of five sublime solo preludes by Skryabin, the Russian composer’s contemporary.

The Miami Herald

March 12, 2015

Higdon viola concerto shines in Friends of Chamber Music program

By Lawrence Budmen

Robert Spano is one of America's finest conductors. An occasional guest with the New World Symphony, Spano returned to South Florida Wednesday night with the Curtis Chamber Orchestra, a 39-member student ensemble from Philadelphia's prestigious Curtis Institute of Music. The Friends of Chamber Music concert at Gusman Concert Hall featured a fine new viola concerto and one of Spano's own scores as well as masterpieces by Prokofiev and Mozart.

Jennifer Higdon, a Curtis faculty member and Pulitzer Prize winner, composes in a tonal, conservative style, but there is nothing stuffy or derivative in her music. Higdon's Viola Concerto (which was premiered last Saturday in Washington) was written for Curtis president Roberto Diaz, former principal viola of the Philadelphia Orchestra.

The concerto is a significant addition to the solo literature for the instrument. Cast in three compact movements, the melodic writing plays to the instrument's darkness of tone. In the opening movement, the viola's deep sonority is offset by pointed wind figures. Country fiddling propels the central movement with mallet percussion playing a prominent role. In the finale, long, expansive melodic phrases and rapid folksy motifs suggest a touch of Copland's *Appalachian Spring*, with the solo viola at one point joined by violin and cello in an impromptu trio.

Higdon could not have wished for a better performance. Diaz showed complete command of his wonderful Amati instrument, his rich, full tone and agility highlighting the concerto's inspired invention. In the second movement, Diaz's intonation remained flawless, even in the instrument's high register, as he tackled Higdon's virtuosic passages at a rapid-fire pace.

Spano and the orchestra managed the tricky rhythms adroitly, with the gleaming brass standing out. Higdon's splendidly crafted concerto was enthusiastically received.

Spano's *Hölderlin Songs* are settings of three poems by Friedrich Hölderlin, an 18th-century poet greatly admired by artists of the romantic era. The music clearly reflects Spano's enthusiasm for the work of Strauss and Wagner. While the first two songs are brief, darkly romantic vignettes, the final setting, "An die Parzen" is an overblown Wagnerian oration that hovers somewhere between Isolde's *Liebestod* and the quieter moments of Brunhilde's *Immolation Scene.*

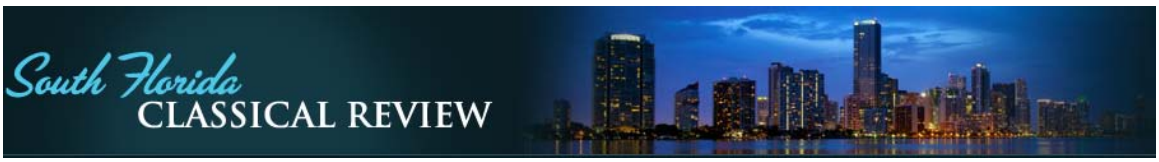
Curtis vocal student Rachel Sterrenberg coped skillfully with the high vocal writing and heavy orchestration. Her gorgeous lower register imbued the

long-winded final song with needed poignancy.

The concert opened with a crisply articulated reading of Prokofiev's Symphony No. 1 (Classical), the composer's sly homage to Haydn and Mozart. Balancing classicism and wit, Spano brought out the silky string lines of the Larghetto and captured the quirky syncopation of the Gavotte in vivacious manner.

Mozart's Symphony No. 41 in C Major (Jupiter) concluded the evening, bringing the program full circle back to one of the greatest symphonies of the classical era. Spano drew a bright and polished performance, far above the student level, highlighting a wealth of detail in the wind and brass writing that often gets obscured.

Robert Spano



November 9, 2014

Spano, New World team up for bracing and memorable Bartok

By David Fleshler

The conductor Robert Spano did something unusual at the conclusion of Saturday night's concert by the New World Symphony.

As the audience applauded the final work of the evening at New World Center in Miami Beach, Spano took a walk, beginning in the back of the violins and going behind the percussion section. He ended up in the trombones, where he started shaking hands, and worked his way down to the bassoons and other wind instruments. The beaming conductor blew a couple of kisses at the harps and finally asked the string section to stand. He wasn't done, however, heading deep into the strings to pump a few hands in the double basses.

Perhaps it was in part happy relief. Shortly before the concert, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, of which Spano is music director, came to terms with management on a new four-year contract, ending a two-month lockout. Spano and the ASO will belatedly open their 70th anniversary season Thursday night.

But clearly the New World Symphony's sizzling performance of Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra also delighted Spano, enough to go beyond the usual quick handshake with the concertmaster. For all its modern harmonies, sardonic turns of phrase and earthy folk tunes, the concerto is one of those virtuoso orchestral pieces in the manner of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* or the tone poems of Richard Strauss—works full of color, melody and atmosphere that allow the orchestra to show off.

And show off they did, in a performance that captured so much of the unique character and sound world of Bartók's most popular composition. Basses and cellos, whose playing sets the tone for much of the first movement, played with ominous, primitive power, with enough clarity to prevent their low tones from becoming murky mush. Winds were eerie in their melodies over a misty accompaniment in the strings.

The second movement can come off as dry, with its quirky wind melodies, but bassoons, oboes and all the woodwinds played the melodies with humor and style. The brass, heroic and aggressive in the first movement, brought a dignified sonority to the formal-sounding brass choir passages of the second. The violas sounded with great nobility in the stirring theme that suddenly emerges from the orchestra. In the final movement, violins delivered an almost frantic power in the lightning-fast

opening notes, powering the music through to a thumping conclusion.

Spano opened the concert with Mozart's Symphony No. 41, the "Jupiter." While some conductors reduce the number of the string players for Mozart and Haydn, Spano kept the ensemble at full strength. This can yield too muddy a texture for the clarity demanded by Classical-period works, but it's a tribute to the skill of the New World string players that in this case that did not happen.

The performance was a joyous, buoyant one, with textures of great transparency throughout, despite the large number of troops on stage. Spano led a well-paced performance that never lagged. In the slow movement, he drew more grace than pathos from the orchestra, keeping the music moving. The final fugue was the climactic, ecstatic passage it was intended to be, with clear entrances and an overarching sense of forward motion, despite all the complexities in the orchestra.

The concert opened with Brahms' *Tragic* Overture, conducted by Christian Reif, the orchestra's conducting fellow. Despite the dramatic quality of the work, he engaged in no exaggerated dynamics or tempo changes. Instead he let the grim, smoldering power of the overture emerge naturally, until the final, climactic minutes. Particularly noteworthy were the New World woodwinds, whose graceful, resonant playing achieved real Brahmsian warmth.

JOURNAL SENTINEL

October 11, 2014

Milwaukee Symphony delivers powerful rendition of Brahms' 'German Requiem'

By Elaine Schmidt

We all feel and express grief differently, but very few of us have done so as eloquently as Brahms did with his "German Requiem."

The requiem, which Brahms referred to as a requiem for all humanity, is not based on the Catholic requiem Mass and its Latin text, but relies instead on passages from Martin Luther's German Bible.

Guest conductor Robert Spano joined the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, MSO Chorus, soprano Jessica Rivera and baritone Nmon Ford in a thoughtful, expressive performance of the work.

Spano's direction of the piece sounded more like a process of sculpting than leading the combined ensembles, eschewing a heart-on-the-sleeve interpretation for a more inward-looking rendering built of detail and clarity.

He brought tremendous shape to choral phrases, creating moments that were profoundly intimate — no small feat when working with an ensemble of well over 100 voices.

Within the orchestra too, a focus on details, such as the blending and dovetailing of phrases and exquisite shaping of individual phrases as well as entire movements, drew the audience into the piece.

The attention to details, along with slow, deliberate crescendos, restrained tempos and powerful, articulate performances by Rivera and Ford, brought weight and gravitas to the piece. The audience responded with an enthusiastic standing ovation.

The evening opened with Jennifer Higdon's elegant "river sings a song to trees," written about the rivers that run through her home city of Atlanta.

It takes very little imagination to get from the piece's title to hearing its delicate, shimmering opening moments as the trickle of a stream.

Higdon uses traditional orchestral voices along with such gentle effects as bowed percussion instruments to create what amounts to a stirring sonic tribute to Atlanta's host of large and small waterways and the spaces they define.

Long, graceful crescendos and decrescendos along with exquisite shifts and changes in orchestral textures create colorful, compelling music.

Spano and the MSO handled the piece with clarity and musical purpose, bringing pure, ringing, beautifully balanced sounds to a vivid performance of the piece.

Robert Israel

Los Angeles Times

June 16, 2014

'Classical Style' at Ojai Music Festival draws on wit, wisdom

By Mark Swed

OJAI — Charles Rosen's "The Classical Style" is an illuminating, academic, occasionally combative, close study of the musical style of Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven by a brilliant pianist and scholar who died in 2012. Though a technical tome, it takes on big, universal issues and proved a surprise hit of 1971, winning a National Book Award and reaching a remarkably wide audience.

Rosen's 43-year-old book, never out of print, pulled a bigger surprise Friday as the subject for the first opera commissioned in the 68-year history of the Ojai Music Festival. The rules of musical form attempted a spectacularly absurd leap off the library shelf onto the lyric stage in the form of Steven Stucky's "The Classical Style: An Opera (of Sorts)."

The concept and comic libretto are by another brilliant pianist and writer, Jeremy Denk, this year's Ojai music director.

If this sounds like a somewhat ridiculous centerpiece for festival programming

that revolved around issues of reinterpreting the Classical era (and will be reviewed further Tuesday), that of course was the point. The whole thing is so side-splitting that one rehearsal reportedly broke down when conductor Robert Spano had an uncontrollable laughing fit and had to be carried off the stage to recover.

He was entitled. "The Classical Style" is a mash-up of Glenn Gould at his most satirical, PDQ Bach at his sauciest and a distractedly erudite Rosen cooking up a French sauce while pontificating on harmonic structure in his kitchen. But underlying the jokes (good ones and the groaners) and tomfoolery, Stucky's resourceful score and Denk's droll text produce an ingeniously eloquent musing on the meaning of life.

On the surface, "The Classical Style" is a supercilious opera of sorts about death. It opens in heaven, with Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven playing Scrabble and squabbling like sitcom characters. They are dismayed by newspaper reports of the death of classical music and their own apparent irrelevance. They get wind of Rosen's book and go looking for him for advice.

The composers turn up at a bar, where they encounter Tonic, Dominant and Subdominant, personifications of musical chords, carrying on. Tonic, the home key, is a grand narcissist. Dominant, harmonically the closest key, is the needy one in the relationship, always dependent upon resolving on the tonic. Sultry Subdominant is the sexy harmonic diversion. Mozart makes a beeline to her.

We get witty harmony lessons. Sonata form, the most important organizing principle of 18th century music, is sung about at a musicology conference.

A sniveling PhD candidate in the music department at UC Berkeley, Henry Snibblesworth, stumbles into the opening scene of "Don Giovanni." His theorizing deflates the Don, who then loses his desire for Donna Anna and thus has no need to kill her father, the Commendatore. He, then, is stuck needing to figure out what to do with his life. Snibblesworth offers him a job at Cal, but the benefits aren't so attractive these days.

The "Tristan" chord, the unresolvable chord Wagner invented, walks into the bar, a sinister stranger dressed as a cockeyed Wotan. Music of the future, he warns, will require an uncertainty principle.

Rosen can't help. Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven return to heaven unfulfilled. Musical styles, we must accept, can mean something to us only if they function like living processes. But to live, styles must also die.

The opera ends with a visit by Robert Schumann to Rosen. A controversial thesis of Rosen's book is that Beethoven's visionary late music was not ahead of its time but rather the fulfillment of the Classical style, taking its implications to their ultimate conclusion. Schumann represented a new departure.

This is Stucky's first opera. In his two-decade association with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, he proved himself a consummate composer of instrumental music. He has a gift for lyricism, exquisite coloration and supple forms. He sometimes reflects on composers of the past.

All of that is characteristic of Stucky's score to "The Classical Style," but a good deal of the Stucky style here is necessarily a pastiche. He subtly interweaves quotes of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven with made-up classical riffs and elements of Stucky's own music, adeptly moving us not only back and forth through history but also through reality and fantasy. There are musical jokes aplenty, some intended for a general audience, wonkier ones setting traps for Spano.

In the end Spano led a finely nuanced performance that featured the Knights, the orchestra from New York that is this year's resident band for the festival, and an excellent eight-member cast assuming 18 roles. Among them were Dominic Armstrong (Haydn and the bartender), Jennifer Zetlan (Mozart and Donna Anna), Ashraf Sewailam

(Beethoven and the Commendatore), Aubrey Allicock (Tonic and Don Giovanni), Kim Josephson (Rosen and the Tristan Chord), Peabody Southwell (Subdominant and Schumann) and Keith Jameson (Snibblesworth). Making Mozart and Schumann pants roles sung by mezzo-sopranos proved a touching touch.

Unfortunately Mary Birnbaum's production at the Libbey Bowl, while engaging, made silliness an enduring priority. Melissa Trn's costumes had a Halloween flavor. Postmodernism was not invited to the party.

That allowed for little room to follow Denk and Stucky into the deeper regions that the opera unexpectedly reaches at the end. If Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven are inane in death, that is because they are dead. The profundity of "The Classical Style," on page and stage, is that we can, with historical hindsight, understand them in death,

But where does a new style come from?

Birth, not death, is music's — and hence life's — greater mystery. Schumann makes the final entrance, transforming Beethoven, a new life with Beethoven's DNA.

Like all births, there is something new in the room that wasn't there before. For Stucky and Denk, this is a fleeting instant of transcendence, namely a miracle.

The New York Times

May 3, 2014

Suspenseful Last Note for a Tribute to Britten

'War Requiem' by Britten, With an Angelic Touch

By Anthony Tommasini

Atlanta Symphony Orchestra presenting Britten's "War Requiem" at Carnegie Hall, with the soprano Evelina Dobraceva.

Last fall Carnegie Hall commemorated the centennial of Benjamin Britten's birth with a substantive festival highlighted by an inspired concert performance of the opera "Peter Grimes." That event, featuring an outstanding cast of singers and David Robertson conducting the St. Louis Symphony, took place on Nov. 22, 2013, the 100th anniversary of the composer's birth.

Yet that was not the official final event of the festival. On Wednesday night at Carnegie Hall, the Britten commemoration ended with the conductor Robert Spano leading the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, three compelling vocal soloists and the Brooklyn Youth Chorus in a performance of Britten's "War Requiem." It is unusual for a Carnegie Hall festival to conclude after a five-

month lag. But the gripping, organic and sensitive performance Mr. Spano led was worth the wait. The Symphony played with rich, varied colorings and incisive control for Mr. Spano, now in his 13th season as music director.

In many ways, “War Requiem,” which lasts nearly 90 minutes and is scored for large forces, is Britten's most public and accessible piece. He wrote it for the 1962 dedication ceremony of a new Coventry Cathedral in England; the original had been destroyed by bombing in World War II. For the text, Britten set passages from the Latin liturgy. But, in a daring stroke, the composer, a lifelong pacifist, incorporated into the score some antiwar poems by Wilfred Owen, who died at 25 on a battlefield a week before the World War I armistice in 1918. So “War Requiem” is at once a powerful memorial work and a personal antiwar screed.

The Owen poems are sung by the tenor and baritone soloists in movements accompanied by scaled-down orchestral forces, like a tender chamber orchestra within the main one. The tenor Anthony Dean Griffey, who sang the role of Peter Grimes movingly in the St. Louis Symphony's concert performance of the opera in November, was to have been the soloist in “War Requiem.” He withdrew because of illness and was replaced on short notice by the American tenor Thomas Cooley.

Mr. Cooley brought a sweet, penetrating lyric tenor voice and aching sensitivity to his singing of the Owen poems, especially the first one Britten set in this score, which begins, “What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?,” music that captures the mix of graphic horror and haunting bitterness in the text. Mr. Cooley had a tendency, though, to mimic the ethereal sound and British accent of Peter Pears, the tenor for whom this music was written, and, at times, this came across as affected.

The baritone Stephen Powell brought a robust voice, crisp diction and sober directness to his singing of the Owen poems. The soprano soloist sings passages from the Latin liturgy as part of certain choral episodes. Evelina Dobraceva's voice was gleaming, focused and powerful, though sometimes steely. Still, the integrity and fervor in her singing won me over, despite very mushy diction.

The excellent Brooklyn Youth Chorus (Dianne Berkun-Menaker, artistic director) sang the passages Britten wrote for boys' chorus from on high, positioned in the upper balcony at Carnegie Hall, an aptly angelic effect. The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Chorus (Norman Mackenzie, director) was as impressive for the controlled beauty and clarity of its singing in hushed, suspenseful passages as it was during the frenzied outbursts, especially the slashing, pummeling music during the climax of “Libera me, Domine,” when the chorus invokes the awful day that the Lord will surely come to judge the world by fire.

Robert Spano

The Boston Globe

April 4, 2014

BSO premieres composer Bernard Rands's new concerto

By Jeremy Eichler

Conductor Robert Spano, pianist Jonathan Biss, and the BSO premiered Bernard Rands's concerto Thursday.

When one speaks of the concerto as a genre, the talk, for better or worse, often returns to metaphors of dialogue. It is in truth an overused but not unhelpful point of entry. One might observe, for instance, that if many Romantic concertos lend themselves to being heard through tropes of the individual (soloist) as pitted against the massed collective (orchestra), composers in the 20th and 21st centuries have felt more free to completely reinvent the terms of the discussion.

The composer Bernard Rands does so at once with boldness and a marvelously organic quality in his striking new Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, given its premiere at Symphony Hall on Thursday night by the BSO and pianist Jonathan Biss under the baton of Robert Spano. In this concerto, neither party is subservient to the other. In fact our

interlocutors are engaged in a constant empathic exchange of mood and information, audibly influencing the other's lines as they shape their own.

The piece, a BSO commission, follows what is an outwardly familiar three-movement flight path, but the subtlety of color and the sophistication of Rands's compositional craft, not to mention the protean interplay between soloist and ensemble, make this score feel refreshingly free of formulas.

Boston Symphony Orchestra
Symphony Hall, Boston

The slow middle movement opens with a quietly vaporous line that spreads outward from the lower strings. The piano does not so much make an entrance as it does slip inside a communal reverie. The brisk finale even manages to summon the genre's signature characteristic — virtuosic display — while turning it on its head by doubling as a study of intervals and interiorities. Supported well by Spano, Biss gave the work a first performance of technical assurance and uncommon musical understanding.

After intermission Spano led a knowing and supple account of Rachmaninoff's Symphonic Dances, a piece written in 1940 though long stretches of the music sound as if the 20th century had not yet happened. The night began sensibly with a taste of the concerto's harmonic inheritance: that is, the world of Debussy's "Nocturnes," with two movements ("Nuages" and "Fetes") dispatched with care if not always consummate atmosphere.

But the stage for the premiere was also set by an enthralling Rand-curated Prelude concert at New England Conservatory, with strong performances mostly by students and illuminating comments by the composer in conversation with the BSO's Robert Kirzinger. As a brief introduction to (and genealogy of) a musical world view, this Prelude format would be hard to beat.

THE ENQUIRER
Cincinnati.Com

May 4, 2013

Festive CSO program filled with drama

By Janelle Gelfand

The Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra finished its season with a blockbuster, all-American showcase in Music Hall this weekend. Capping Friday night's concert was a brilliant performance of Copland's Symphony No. 3, which includes the composer's famed "Fanfare for the Common Man."

Led by Ohio-born maestro Robert Spano, it was a moment of considerable drama – underscored by the fact that Copland wrote his fanfare for this very orchestra and it was premiered on Music Hall's stage in 1943.

The celebratory program also hailed Cincinnati's 225th birthday, with a multimedia performance of American composer Jennifer Higdon's "All Things Majestic." The performance included projections of iconic images of Cincinnati submitted by the public to CET.

The most jaw-dropping moment occurred when American pianist Garrick Ohlsson took the stage in Samuel Barber's Piano Concerto. The concerto was premiered in 1962 by pianist John Browning, who last played it in Music Hall in 1984 and was its ardent champion until his death in 2003. Its style in the grand romantic tradition was ideally suited to Ohlsson – the first to attempt this daunting piece with the CSO since Browning.

The concerto's massive opening movement is a multifaceted tapestry with percussive writing for the piano, tricky rhythms for the orchestra and brief moments of romantic beauty. Ohlsson's touch was pristine, powerful and never harsh. He used his entire 6-foot 4-inch frame to tackle fiendishly difficult octaves, runs, glissandos and hand-blurring figures, yet he never broke a sweat.

It seemed as if the pianist was playing all 88 keys at once in the flashy cadenza, and the dazzling fireworks continued throughout the finale. Yet the slow movement, a "canzone," was remarkable for the elegance and singing tone Ohlsson brought to the music.

Spano was completely in synch with the pianist, and the performance gripped from start to finish. For an encore, Ohlsson played an impressionistic piano gem by American Charles Griffes: "The White Peacock."

Spano, music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, has won six Grammy Awards with his orchestra. On the podium, he projected relaxed confidence. Throughout Copland's Symphony No. 3, which concluded the program, his gestures were economical, yet he got terrific results from the players.

Copland's orchestral sound, with its wide-open-prairie harmonies and folk-

like melodies, is distinctively American. This symphony is also ideal for the Cincinnati sound, with its brass and percussion sections that consistently play with incisive clarity.

Spano inspired atmospheric beauty in the serene moments and illuminated vibrant details in the winds and strings. Brass fanfares were crisp and brilliantly performed. The conductor's tempos were well-paced throughout the four movements, and he built seamlessly to the grandeur of "Fanfare for the Common Man," which opens the finale.

The program began with Higdon's 23-minute orchestral canvas "All Things Majestic," which premiered at the Grand Teton Music Festival in 2011. Its music evokes the splendor of the Tetons. Higdon rewrote its four movement titles as a portrait for Cincinnati.

Higdon is masterful at orchestration, and her colorful writing included close, craggy harmonies, bright flourishes for winds and majestic, angular themes for the brass. Most memorable was the slower-paced "Neighborhoods and Nature," which unfolded with a quiet beauty. It featured a sonorous melody for strings, and a string quartet emerged from the texture. Spano, a champion of her work, led with sensitivity.

Before the program, the School for Creative and Performing Arts Middle School Choir performed the world premiere of Higdon's new choral piece, "Hear My Voice" during "Classical Conversations."

As part of season-ending festivities, the orchestra hosted OTR Night, which included a preconcert bicycle event and post-concert music and food trucks in the newly restored Washington Park.

The orchestra also acknowledged the retirement of violist Sari-Eringer Thoman, who joined the orchestra in 1977.

The New York Times

March 21, 2013

Canyons, Inspiring to the Eye, Capture the Ear, Too

Messiaen's 'Des Canyons,' by Ensemble ACJW at Zankel Hall

By Vivien Schweitzer

Ensemble ACJW, conducted by Robert Spano, performed Olivier Messiaen's "Des Canyons aux Étoiles" on Tuesday at Zankel Hall. The work was inspired by Messiaen's visits to Utah's parks in the early 1970s.

The visionary French composer Olivier Messiaen and the citizens of Utah had a mutual appreciation. Messiaen, inspired to write his glittering "Des Canyons aux Étoiles" ("From the Canyons to the Stars") after visiting the state's parks in 1972, declared southern Utah the most mystical landscape he had ever seen. In gratitude, a mountain was renamed in his honor.

Many composers have been inspired by nature, resulting in famous aural depictions like Strauss's "Alpine Symphony." But Messiaen's musical language, with its alluring harmonies and shimmering textures, is unique. "Des Canyons," a 12-movement orchestral suite, was commissioned by Alice Tully in honor of the American bicentennial in 1976. It received an excellent performance at Zankel Hall on Tuesday evening, with Robert Spano, music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, conducting Ensemble ACJW.

Messiaen scored the work for chamber orchestra and four soloists: piano, French horn, xylorimba and glockenspiel. Some movements evoke a particular setting, like Bryce Canyon. The composer's transcriptions of birdsong are woven throughout the work, with varieties of orioles represented by the piano, xylorimba and woodwinds. Alongside the fanciful birdcalls the work incorporates the composer's other trademarks: Greek, Hindu and Balinese rhythms; contemplative interludes; shimmering cluster chords; and striking dissonances. Messiaen, a synesthetic, sensed colors when he heard particular harmonies or sounds. A Roman Catholic steeped in religious mysticism, he described "Des Canyons" as "an act of praise and contemplation" that "contains all the colors of the rainbow." It is those kaleidoscopic shades that render this music so dazzling, and they were beautifully conveyed here by these excellent musicians. (The ensemble consists of current fellows or alumni of the Academy — a fellowship program of Carnegie Hall, the Juilliard School and the New York City Department of Education.)

Juho Pohjonen played the fiendishly difficult piano part brilliantly, conquering its technical challenges and highlighting myriad colors, as well as contrasting the exuberant elements with moments of introspective clarity. Laura Weiner deftly explored the varied textures and sonic effects of the challenging French horn solo. Throughout, the playing was enlivened by the sparkling contributions of Ian Sullivan on xylorimba and Jared Soldiviero on glockenspiel.

Mr. Spano conducted a dynamic performance that built to suitably ecstatic heights during the final two movements, which end with the brass chorales and rapturous bells of "Zion Park et la Cité Céleste."

The New York Times

March 12, 2013

A Rousing 'Pasión,' This Time Spanning Generations as Well as Cultures

Osvaldo Golijov's 'Pasión Según San Marcos' at Carnegie Hall

By Anthony Tommasini

Osvaldo Golijov's Pasión Según San Marcos An ensemble combined singers from Venezuela with New York-area students.

For all of its popularity since its triumphant premiere in Stuttgart, Germany, in 2000, Osvaldo Golijov's "Pasión Según San Marcos" ("The St. Mark Passion") is not likely to become a standard repertory work. Reimagining the Bach Passions, Mr. Golijov tells the story of the Crucifixion as it has been lived and felt every day in Latin America. This heady, polystylistic, genre-blurring work blends Brazilian, Afro-Cuban and other styles of Latin American folk and pop music into a 90-minute theatrical score that includes elements of ritual and dance. Any presentation requires performers steeped in the musical traditions from which Mr. Golijov draws.

Since its premiere, the "Pasión" has been championed by a touring company of choristers (the Schola Cantorum de Venezuela, directed by María Guínand), instrumentalists (Orquesta La Pasión) and stellar soloists headed by the Grammy Award-winning Brazilian jazz

singer Luciana Souza. The “Pasión” road show came to New York for the Next Wave Festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 2002, for a Golijov festival at Lincoln Center in 2006 and the Mostly Mozart Festival in 2007, all conducted by Robert Spano.

But on Sunday afternoon at Carnegie Hall the singers of the Schola Cantorum were joined by students from the Forest Hills High School Concert Choir (Robert Koch, director) and the Frank Sinatra School of the Arts Concert Choir (Heidi Best, director), as well as young members of Songs of Solomon, an inspirational ensemble that draws from New York, New Jersey and Connecticut (Chantel Wright, director). The performance was a Carnegie Hall Creative Learning Project, which pairs New York students with professional musicians.

It must have been deeply gratifying for Mr. Golijov to see his “Pasión” performed with such enthusiasm and joy by a chorus of nearly 160 that mixed New York-area high school students with the impressive Venezuelan artists. The choristers were similarly dressed, in white with Holy Purple sashes, all singing and shouting, bobbing and weaving.

Mr. Spano was again the conductor. The 14 core members of the Orquesta La Pasión, who play Latin American instruments, including various drums and Brazilian rattles, were joined by a roster of freelance string players.

Mr. Golijov is a musical polyglot, an Argentine Jew equally immersed in South American music and klezmer, who studied in Israel and has explored diverse contemporary styles. For me the most musically involving sections of this work are those in which Mr. Golijov draws upon elements of Western classical heritage, as in the mesmerizing “Lúa Descolorida” (“Colorless Moon”), which describes Peter’s disowning of Jesus. Here the “Pasión” departs from biblical texts and substitutes a meditative 19th-century Galician poem, blending elements of French Baroque sacred music with a plaintive vocal line, sung radiantly on Sunday by the soprano Jessica Rivera.

But for long stretches the “Pasión” shook the hall with pummeling Latin American percussion riffs and vibrant choral outbursts. Ms. Souza, as always, brought soulful emotion and elegant vocalism to her performance. The singer and dancer Reynaldo González-Fernández was riveting in “Cara a Cara” (“Face to Face”), singing a heated duet with himself, playing both Jesus and Peter in a tense exchange.

The most affecting moment of the tremendous ovation came when the directors of the youth choruses took the stage for a bow, a couple of them looking teary. It is so seldom that these dedicated educators receive the attention they deserve.

The New York Times

October 30, 2012

ATLANTA SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA AND CHORUS

By Vivien Schweitzer

Like other major American orchestras, the Atlanta Symphony recently went through contract negotiations that nearly derailed the start of its season. The musicians forfeited a month of pay before a new agreement, with reduced salaries and benefits, was reached in late September.

If the musicians are demoralized, it certainly didn't show in their terrific concert on Sunday evening at Carnegie Hall, where Robert Spano, the ensemble's music director, conducted vividly hued interpretations of Leonard Bernstein's "Chichester Psalms" and William Walton's "Belshazzar's Feast."

Bernstein experimented with various avant-garde techniques during his career, but abandoned those aesthetics for a melodic style that felt more natural to him. He described his "Chichester Psalms" as "the most accessible, B-flat-majorish tonal piece I've ever written."

The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus offered a radiant performance of this lovely, serene work, with the countertenor John Holiday as the expressive soloist. Mr. Spano also led a compelling rendition of the Walton piece; tightly wrought, immaculate performances by the orchestra and chorus meshed into an exciting whole. The baritone Brett Polegato rendered the dramatic elements even more arresting with his powerful, richly hued solos.

The concert began on an optimistic note with Copland's "Appalachian Spring" Suite, featuring beautifully rendered woodwind solos. The orchestra eloquently conveyed each of the vigorous, enigmatic and tender moods of this programmatic work, with its familiar quotation of the Shaker melody "Simple Gifts."

Robert Spano

The New York Times

February 23, 2012

A Night When Wagner, in French, Became a Bridge Between Two Repertories

By Allan Kozinn

Eric Owens The bass-baritone, with Robert Spano at the piano, at Zankel Hall on Tuesday in his program of German and French works

The bass-baritone Eric Owens has had his biggest successes in opera, most notably as Alberich in the Metropolitan Opera's current staging of Wagner's "Ring" cycle. So he might have been right when he said, in a recent interview, that some listeners were probably hoping he would sing arias at his recital at Zankel Hall on Tuesday evening. But listeners with dashed expectations were hard to spot amid the rhythmic clapping at the end of the concert, and if there was cause for disappointment, it was that this expressive, rich-voiced singer offered only two encores.

For anyone who prizes the miniature, self-contained dramas of the art-song repertory, Mr. Owens did precisely the

right thing: he devoted his recital to German and French songs, with a Wagner rarity as common ground, sort of: “Les Deux Grenadiers” has a French text (actually, a translation of a Heine poem) and quotes the melody of the “Marseillaise” in its final section.

Mr. Owens quickly established his ability to wrap his deep voice around a text and create a distinct sense of character. You had to admire not only the nuanced tone he brought to Wolf’s “Three Poems by Michelangelo” but the thoughtful mingling currents of reverence and passion as well. Otherworldly qualities of a darker sort informed Schumann’s “Muttertraum” and “Der Schatzgräber,” and in Schubert’s “Prometheus” Mr. Owens maintained a perfect balance of dignity and rage.

Other complexities, both emotional and technical, illuminated his readings of the French songs. In Debussy’s “Beau Soir” and “L’Âme Évaporée” he wove a strand of resignation through the music’s ravishing surface textures. His French set also included an elegant, supple account of Henri Duparc’s “Invitation au Voyage” and a courtly (if virtually parody free) interpretation of Ravel’s “Don Quichotte à Dulcinée.”

Probably the most striking element of Mr. Owens’s interpretive style is his use of timbre. In broad terms, he brought a bright, almost steely edge to most of the German songs and a gauzy, smoother tone to the French music. The encores touched on both extremes. He followed a remarkably gentle performance of Purcell’s “Music for a While” with a spirited, moving rendering of a Copland folk setting, “At the River.”

Mr. Owens’s pianist, Robert Spano, is more typically seen waving a baton (as music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and elsewhere) than sitting at the keyboard. He proved a colorful, commanding player, and he took his share of the spotlight without stealing it from Mr. Owens.

Robert Spano

American Record Guide
INDEPENDENT CRITICS REVIEWING CLASSICAL RECORDINGS AND MUSIC IN CONCERT

November/December 2009

Seattle Opera

Ring of the Nibelung Redux

Melinda Bargreen

Every four years, like the Olympic Games, it is time for Seattle Opera's three-"Ring" circus: three sold-out cycles of Wagner's massive *Ring of the Nibelung*. Presented at the height of summer to audiences from 49 states (nobody from West Virginia bought tickets this year), 23 countries, and 8 Canadian provinces, the Ring actually does have a lot in common with the Olympics. The Games's motto, "Citius, Altius, Fortius" (swifter, higher, stronger), could well represent the aspirations of many of this Ring's performers and producers, except for the "swifter" part. Under conductor Robert Spano, the tempos this year had more *gravitas* than speed, as if he had been listening to Reginald Goodall's recordings.

No matter. The atmosphere inside and outside Seattle's McCaw Hall for the first Ring cycle (August 9-14) was positively electric as enthusiastic Wagnerites lined up for everything from scholarly symposia and lectures to T-shirts to wind-up Wagner dolls, Valhalla luggage tags, and Rhinegold chocolates. The audiences were alternately reverent (relentlessly shushing the few patrons who started to applaud the dazzling opening scene of *Das Rheingold*) and crazed (the ovations recalled the roar of international soccer matches). Passionate arguments erupted in intermissions over the merits of favored singers; audience members were heard trumping each other over the number of Rings they've seen. One member of the orchestra, which is drawn primarily from the Seattle Symphony, later estimated his total at more than 60.

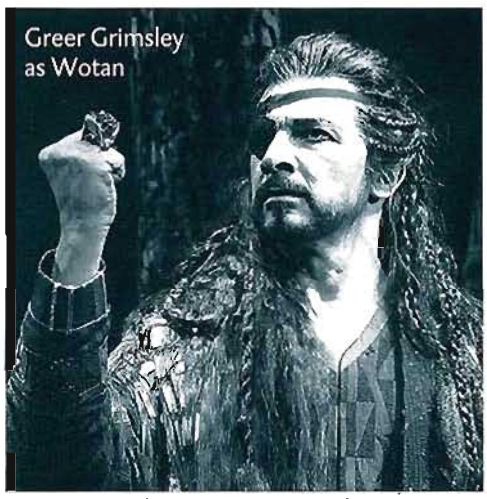
Because this is techno-happy Seattle, home of Microsoft and Amazon.com, cyberspace was ringing too with blogs, tweets, podcasts, and every possible kind of on-line enhancement, including running commentary on Seattle Opera's website by a first-time Ring-goer, opportunities for amateur reviewers to trumpet their views, and a daily photo caption contest. (Want your own Wagner action figure, or a *Ring des Nibelungen* tie? Just hit www.seattleopera.org.)

The 2009 Ring, designed by Thomas Lynch and directed by Stephen Wadsworth, was the third appearance of an unusually handsome, naturalistic production that emerged in 2001 and will have another airing four years from now. [For its evolution, see Nov/Dec 2001 and Nov/Dec 2005.] With imaginative costumes by Martin Pakledinaz and dramatically effective lighting by Peter Kaczorowski, this remains a Ring of spectacular visuals. The Rhinemaidens twirl in midair like a Cirque de Soleil act as they sing Wagner's music, flames lick at the craggy rock where the sleeping Brünnhilde awaits her hero, and the grand finale moves through conflagration and water to the restoration of the original forest set. The Ring comes full circle; in its end is its beginning.

So how did this year's first cycle go? Not down in history as Seattle's greatest Ring ever, that's for sure. The cast, more than 63% of which was new to Seattle, offered some brilliant new talent but also some lesser lights. The ghosts of great singers from past Seattle Rings, from Rita Hunter and Jane Eaglen to

Ewa Podles, loomed like an unseen but palpable presence over many of the scenes.

Neither of the star-crossed lovers, Siegfried (Stig Andersen) and Brünnhilde (Janice Baird), was at the top strength described by enthusiastic reviewers of earlier productions. Ring gremlins (as Seattle Opera General Director Speight Jenkins aptly put it) struck twice in *Götterdämmerung*, with computer malfunctions delaying the start of two scenes long enough so that Spano had to halt the orchestra twice. More minor snafus emanated from the orchestra pit, where the horns had more than one off night.


Greer Grimsley as Wotan

But the plusses were considerably more numerous than the minusses. Wadsworth's staging, always centered on human interaction and communication, has been fine-tuned unerringly on the dramatic heart of every scene, and it was fun to watch the singing actors ignite that drama. Jenkins's considerable care with casting bore fruit in great performance after performance from even the small roles, such as Jason Collins as Froh, Gordon Hawkins's outings as Donner and Gunther, to Marie Plette's lyrical turns as both Freia and Gutrune. The production also boasted as winning a troupe of Valkyries as has ever hit Seattle (Miriam Murphy, Michele Losier, Sally Wolf, the ever-versatile Marie Plette, Maria Streijffert, Jennifer Hines, Sarah Heltzel, and Luretta Bybee).

The finest performances came in some of the less likely roles. Stephanie Blythe, the undisputed queen of this Ring, sang not only a memorable Fricka but also the Second Norn and a mesmerizing Waltraute. Blythe's fans won't be surprised to hear that her huge, creamy mezzo-soprano simply swept everyone else off the stage with its rich power and beauty. Her confrontation with Baird's Brünnhilde in Waltraute's narrative scene was especially telling.

The sensation of this year's Ring was not the central Siegfried-Brünnhilde relationship, but—believe it or not—Wotan and Fricka. In *Die Walküre*, the scene where Fricka confronts her erring husband to demand the death of Siegmund was one of the great emotional turning points of this Ring. This was no contest between a shrewish, jealous wife and her defensive husband but an inexorable progression toward the truth of Wotan's self-delusion by two spouses who care deeply about each other.


Das Rheinegold

It says a great deal about Greer Grimsley's mighty Wotan that he was able to hold the stage opposite Blythe. Over the past two productions, Grimsley has really grown into his role as king of the gods, not just vocally (his voice is bigger and more resonant than before) but dramatically: every word mattered, and every word's meaning was clear.

This year's Nibelungs were particularly good. Richard Paul Fink as Alberich was more refined yet freer this time than ever before; his curse (in *Das Rheingold*) was compelling, and his comic timing in the *Siegfried* scene where he and Mime are both gibbering with rage before the dragon's den was highly effective. And Mime, portrayed by newcomer Dennis Petersen, was a formidable enough antagonist to Siegfried that he projected genuine menace, not just unpleasantness. Vocally extremely strong, Petersen's performance in *Siegfried* was full of masterly touches from the humorous to the grim.

The Wälsung twins, Siegmund (Stuart Skelton) and Sieglinde (Margaret Jane Wray), were the brilliant pair that launched the first act of *Die Walküre* right past the terrifically menacing Hunding (Andrea Silvestrelli) and into the operatic stratosphere. Electrifying singing and utterly committed acting transformed this act—always one of the high points of any Ring—into something quite extraordinary.

Those pirouetting Rhinemaidens, lovely to hear as well as to look at, were Julianne Gearhart, Michele Losier, and Jennifer Hines, with Gearhart also taking a stellar turn as the Forest Bird. The Rhinemaidens, who preceded their high-wire act with many months of serious workouts, sang mellifluously.

And what about the Valkyrie herself, Janice Baird? A beautiful, slim woman with strong acting skills, she debuted last season in Seattle as Elektra; she was theatrically gripping and sang powerfully. But as Brünnhilde she was more variable. A shaky start in *Walküre* led to a more confident, resonant performance in the third act of *Siegfried*; but in *Götterdämmerung* she was uneven, lacking strength in the crucial Immolation Scene.

Baird's is a most unusual voice. Sometimes you can clearly hear a first-rate dramatic soprano at work, radiating wonderful strength and a clarion quality right where many Brünnhildes have the most problems: with those top notes, especially the Cs. Baird's high notes were just spectacular, huge and fully sung and beautiful. But in the mid-register, where a lot of Brünnhilde's music lies, her voice lacked power and a sure sense of the pitch's center. A wide vibrato didn't help matters.

Baird's Siegfried, Stig Andersen, is a respected veteran in this role, but in Seattle he was hindered by a virus and fever (as Jenkins announced from the stage before the third opera's start, while the audience collectively held its breath—general directors' pre-curtain announcements at Ring operas are seldom good news). Andersen soldiered through *Siegfried* that night with fortitude and occasional glimpses of the brilliance he must be able to show when healthier. His most impressive singing came at the very end of his taxing role in *Götterdämmerung* in Siegfried's death scene, where he sang with a moving lyricism that added an extra edge of pathos to the hero's downfall.

Spano's conducting could have been more sensitive to the difficulties of his principal singers; the Siegfried-Brünnhilde duet in the Prologue to *Götterdämmerung* was thoroughly swamped by the orchestra. The slow tempos must have sometimes been a trial to the singers; at this writing, reports from the second cycle indicated a *Walküre* that ran for nearly five hours. But the passion of this huge score was clearly conveyed by Spano's grasp of the breadth and sweep of the Ring; the orchestra of experienced Wagnerians responded with playing that was both warm and moving.

Robert Spano

The New York Times

December 17, 2007

Tweaking A Definitive Moment In History

DAN REST/LYRIC OPERA OF CHICAGO

Gerald Finley as J. Robert Oppenheimer in "Doctor Atomic," at Lyric Opera of Chicago.

ANTHONY TOMMASINI

MUSIC REVIEW

CHICAGO — John Adams's "Doctor Atomic" enjoyed a major success during its premiere production two years ago at the San Francisco Opera. Yet even among the work's champions, the consensus was that this ambitious opera — about the physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer, who presided over the Manhattan Project to build the first atomic bombs — needed some tweaking.

Mr. Adams wrote the opera with his longtime colleague Peter Sellars — who directed the production and assembled the unconventional yet surprisingly fluid libretto from interviews with project participants, history books, transcripts of conversations, declassified documents and poetry, notably "The Holy Sonnets" of John Donne. The creators made some significant changes, though, as the opera found its way to the two companies that have co-produced it with the San Francisco Opera: first De Nederlandse Opera in Amsterdam in June, and now Lyric Opera of Chicago, where the production opened to a packed house on Friday.

Doctor Atomic
Lyric Opera of Chicago

Once again "Doctor Atomic" came across as the most complex and inventive of Mr. Adams's works, an engrossing operatic drama, even though very little happens. Yet by the end the entire world has changed forever.

The opera begins in June 1945, as the scientists and military personnel working on the project in Los Alamos, N.M., are poised to test the first atomic bomb. Most of the story takes place on the night before and the morning of July 16, the day of the first test. For the two and three-quarter hours everyone just waits for the inevitable. The characters adjust last-minute details and fret about the gusty winds and lightning storms. The physicist Enrico Fermi (who does not appear) has been taking bets on whether the detonation might set the Earth's atmosphere on fire. But the internal dramas are excruciating as the participants grapple with their consciences.

Gerald Finley, the Canadian baritone who created the title role, was back as Oppenheimer, and his portrayal is even stronger. He sings with melting richness yet lucid diction. Puffing away on cigarettes, his suit forever rumpled, full of bravado yet plagued with doubts, Mr. Finley's Oppenheimer is a tragically flawed and Faustian figure who dares to push science into unknown and potentially catastrophic realms.

Questioned about the moral implications of the project work by his pugnacious colleague Edward Teller (portrayed, as at the premiere, with chilling authority by the husky-voiced baritone Richard Paul Fink), Oppenheimer deflects the matter. "The nation's fate should be left in the hands of the best men in Washington," he says.

The role of Kitty, Oppenheimer's wife, originally for mezzo-soprano, has been rewritten for soprano, here the radiant lyric soprano Jessica Rivera in a vulnerable and intense portrayal. A crucial early scene takes place in the Oppenheimers' bedroom, where Kitty, full of fears about her moody, brilliant and distant husband, cozies up to him in bed and voices her feelings in lines by the poet Muriel Rukeyser: "A world is to be fought for, sung, and built/Love must imagine the world."

More music has been added to Kitty's part. Still, some of her scenes seem too languid and drawn out. For one, an episode in Act II when Kitty, shaken with fear, sits in a lawn chair drinking whiskey as her American Indian maid, the all-knowing Pasqualita, a kind of Erda of the American Southwest (the earthy contralto Meredith Arwady), watches the Oppenheimer children.

Three notable singers also recreate roles from the premiere. The fresh-voiced lyric tenor Thomas Glenn gives a disarming portrayal of the earnest, idealistic young physicist Robert Wilson. The robust bass-baritone Eric Owens is the blustery Gen. Leslie Groves, who ferociously commands a bedraggled meteorologist, Jack Hubbard (the veteran baritone James Maddalena), to assure him that the weather will be suitable for the big test of "the gadget," as people keep calling the bomb.

The choristers are costumed mostly as support staff at Los Alamos: cafeteria workers, custodians, technicians, clerical aides. Mr. Sellars has devised some highly stylized and effective ensemble movements for the chorus members, as when they shuffle en masse across the stage, filled with anxiety. I still do not find that the dance elements by the choreographer Lucinda Childs add much. When the dramatic tension threatens to lag, eight dancers in T-shirts and khakis dash on to the stage and twirl around in the background.

Mr. Adams conceived the opera for an orchestra that included electronic instruments and recorded sounds. To make sure the singers could perform subtly and still be heard, they wear body microphones. In San Francisco on opening night the balances were not right; here they were. The amplification was minimal and unobtrusive, though those who think of opera as an art form for natural sound will have to adjust.

In this revival Mr. Adams's score seemed even more ingenious. The tremulous surface of the orchestra music is deceptively calm, allowing the vocal lines to dominate. Just below, though, the orchestra teems with fractured meters, intertwining contrapuntal elements, fitful bursts and Mr. Adams's most tartly dissonant, boldly unmoored harmonies. The conductor, Robert Spano, was the master of this score, ably guiding every metric shift and fractured meter, conducting with inexorable sweep yet telling detail.

Perhaps there will be more changes before "Doctor Atomic" arrives at the Metropolitan Opera in its own production, details to be finalized. It will surely be just as grimly relevant.

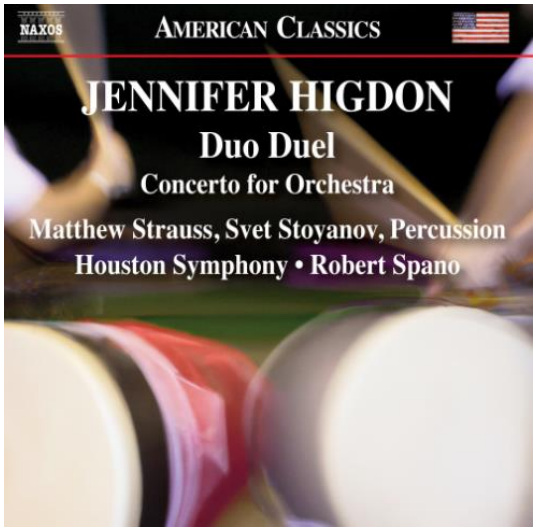
EarRelevant™

Atlanta's voice for classical and post-classical music

July 31, 2023

Robert Spano and Houston Symphony capture the rhythmic brilliance of Jennifer Higdon's music in new CD

By Giorgio Koukl



When characterizing the compositional style of **Jennifer Higdon**, one word immediately comes to mind: rhythm.

Higdon has many outstanding characteristics: exceptional bravura of orchestration and great inventiveness of colors. But her best quality ever is her capacity to build sound constructs of energy and speed which are breathtaking.

On this Naxos American Classics CD, we can listen to a first-time recording of *Duo Duel* (2020) for two percussionists and orchestra and a *Concerto for Orchestra* (2002).

Both works are directed with great precision and sense of dynamics by the conductor **Robert Spano** and played by the spectacular **Houston Symphony Orchestra**.

Since, as said, the rhythm is of particular interest for Ms. Higdon, it is only logical that she gives much attention to the percussion.

Duo Duel, with its nearly 24 minutes in a single movement, starts with some noninvasive sounds, slightly recalling a Christmas atmosphere. Nothing warns the listener about what is coming next. While the orchestra slowly steps in, an absolute orgy of contrasting rhythmical cells, micro themes, so to say, builds up. The orchestral interludes have their generous space to let the two brave percussionists, **Matthew Strauss** and **Svet Stoyanov**, breathe and regain energy.

Towards the end, there is one last cadenza, where the percussionists are playing one *against* the other, the speed obtained is something rarely heard before. In the big finale, the layers of different orchestral sections become so thick that even the skilled listener has difficulty digesting it all.

Higdon uses the percussion in a rather traditional way, rarely using special playing techniques, except for using a string instrument bow to play the vibraphone. Still, even with this self-imposed limitation, we get a score that is

never boring and successfully obtains an ever-changing carpet of colors.

Using *Concerto for Orchestra* as a title immediately recalls some precedent works with the same name. To cite the two most famous: Bartok and Lutoslawski.

Being divided into five sections, where the fourth and the fifth are “attacca,” once again, most of Higdon’s music is loaded with adrenaline. The slow sections are rare; if present, they are underlined with some sort of pulsation that voluntarily disturbs the quiet.

Here Robert Spano delivers a real firework of precisely crafted passages without any uncertainty, a true wonder of a symbiosis of a conductor and his orchestra.

Ms. Higdon uses a quite traditional orchestration, never using “exotic” instruments and avoiding even instruments like piano or harpsichord, which are pretty common.

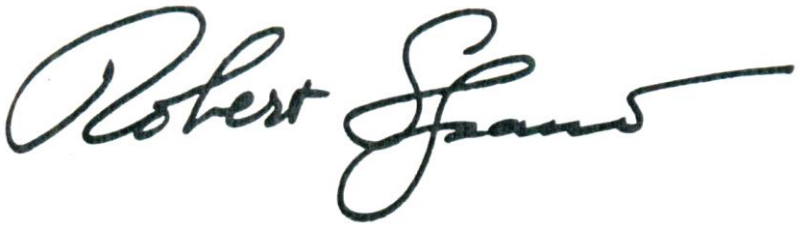
When listening to Bartok and Lutoslawski, it seems that their common goal is to create a sense of “before” and “after” where themes are returning, well-spaced with calmer sections, building a well-planned sound surface, giving the listener time to adjust and enjoy.

The approach of Ms. Higdon is a very different one.

Her music, similar to a lava stream, proceeds forwards without caring much about what happened before, and if sometimes a theme returns, it is mostly transformed beyond recognition. Good examples are the fourth and fifth sections of the orchestra concerto.

As she explains in the booklet, the speed is constantly augmented throughout the duration, reaching a difficult-to-beat climax.

This disc is a clear recommendation to anybody who admires the music of our century but prefers to avoid venturing into too-experimental fields.



July 13, 2017

Spano releases disc of his skillfully drawn music; Henry plays newly discovered Brahms

By Mark Gresham

Robert Spano is best known as music director and conductor of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, but he has also gained an increased reputation recently as composer and pianist. Several weeks ago, ASO Media released a new CD featuring music composed and performed by Spano: a cycle of three songs entitled "Hölderlin-Lieder" and the piano sonata "Four Elements."

As the name implies, "Hölderlin-Lieder" are settings of poems by the esteemed German lyric poet Friedrich Hölderlin, a major personality in the closely linked movements of German romanticism and German idealism. Spano here sets three of Hölderlin's poems for soprano and piano. Jessica Rivera, a long-time collaborator with Spano, is the featured singer, with Spano himself as pianist.

The song cycle wastes no time with the opening of the first and briefest of the three songs, "Lebenslauf" ("The Course of Life"). Rather than a long instrumental introduction, it begins with a swift arpeggiated flourish in the piano, just enough for an up-breath, and then Rivera's golden voice enters boldly on the phrase, "Hoch auf strebte mein Geist" ("High up my spirit aspired"). She drops down to a more contemplative feeling in the middle, where a piano interlude intervenes. By the end, the mood has quickly built back to the intensity at which it began, and the song concludes its emotional arc after a mere two minutes. In many ways it feels like it ought to be the conclusion of a much longer song, but it is also complete in itself.

The second song, "Sokrates und Alcibiades" ("Socrates and Alcibiades") is not quite half again as long. It ponders the beauty of youth and love, and how "in the end, the wise will often bow to the beautiful." At nearly eight minutes, the final song "An die Parzen" ("To the Fates") is considerably longer than the other two combined. It passionately sings of the soul in a life fully lived, without regret for the silence of death which must eventually come, and ends with a calm feeling of contentment.

For the balance of the CD, Spano is solo pianist for his "Sonata: Four Elements" — inspired by the four classical "elements" of Western antiquity, thus the titles of the four movements: "earth songs," "air born," under water" and "on fire."

This sonata is the formalized, concert version of music Spano had most recently provided for *cloth{field}* – a collaboration with choreographer Lauri

Stallings, performed last September. Needless to say, for that event the sequence of musical passages was juggled around a bit. In this CD, we get to hear that music in its purely musical construct, the form in which Spano has played it in recital, including last summer at the Aspen Music Festival.

The sonics of the CD are excellent, and the presence of both Rivera and Spano well-suited. It is a fine presentation of both Rivera's voice and Spano's collaborative capabilities at the piano, as well as his insight into his skills as a composer.

Robert Spano

Oberon's Grove

May 10, 2017

Music by Robert Spano

A disc of music by Robert Spano has come my way, and I am pleased to report that it makes for a truly satisfying listening experience. Maestro Spano is Music Director of the Atlanta Symphony; with that orchestra, he has made a number of excellent recordings (their Vaughan Williams *Sea Symphony* is a particular favorite of mine). On this latest release, from ASO, we experience Spano as both an imaginative and evocative composer - with a special gift for writing for the voice - and a poetic pianist.

Soprano Jessica Rivera sings Spano's *Hölderlin-Lieder*: settings of three poems by the German Romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin. Hölderlin's persona was steeped in Greek mythology; he viewed the gods of Greece as manifesting themselves to humanity thru nature: the sun, earth, sea, and sky.

The first of the three songs, *Liebeslauf* ('The Course of Life'), begins ecstatically. Spano immediately shows himself as a composer who cherishes the voice; eschewing quirky and (ultimately) distracting gimmicks in his vocal writing, Spano instead evokes the great *lieder* composers - from Schumann and Schubert to Korngold and Zemlinsky - in his melodic persuasiveness. Yet his style is thoroughly contemporary. The piano supports, sustains, and wraps itself around the voice, all to distinctive effect.

From its euphoric start, *Liebeslauf* soon descends to a reflective state: love, the singer says, has drawn her down...and grief, still further. The piano gently underscores her acceptance of these setbacks, yet the mood rebounds to an almost rapturous state as she senses the opportunity for a new beginning. Ms. Rivera's appealing lyricism, in which she combines a soft-focus of tone with verbal surety, makes her a skilled vocal painter.

In *Socrates und Alcibiades*, Hölderlin's connection to the ancient world is evinced. The song is pensive to begin with, the singer adapting an insinuating colour as she wonders why Socrates is so entranced by the young Alcibiades. Here again, Ms. Rivera's sensitivity to the words is keen yet free of over-emphasis; she's a wonderfully natural interpreter. There is a mounting of passion in the music, yet it stabilizes into a more thoughtful state: "In the end, the wise will often bow to beauty." Mr. Spano brings in some absolutely gorgeous measures for the piano, and he plays them so lovingly.

The Rivera/Spano collaboration excels further in the final song - the longest of the three - *An die Parzen* ('To The Fates'). Here the Hölderlin text and the Spano music converge ideally: the poem seems to allude to Orpheus. A feeling of both resignation and longing fills the air, and Ms. Rivera yet again finds lovely hues, now in her lower register. The song conveys a sense of the mysteries of life and death in the ebb and flow of the mingled voice and piano.

Following a rise of passion, the pensive piano takes over. Soaring, the singer returns in a greeting to the realm of the spirits. Then the voice takes on a colour

of serene reflection: "For once I lived as the gods - and I need nothing else." Ms. Rivera's final note is like a benediction, which the piano softly affirms.

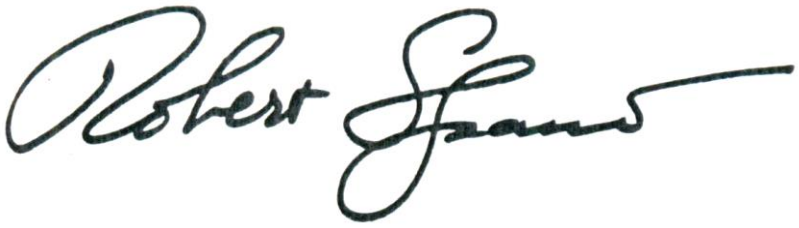
I heartily suggest that lyric sopranos everywhere have a listen to these songs; they will make a very worthy "21st century" addition to recital repertoire.

The excellence of Mr. Spano's pianism assures a persuasive performance of the *Sonata: Four Elements*. Right from the shining, isolated high tones of the first - and longest - movement ('*earth songs*'), the pianist's sense of mystery proves a key element to the appreciation of the piece. The music is gentle at first, drawing upon images from nature from droplets of dew or shards of crystal; a more animated passage evokes streams and breezes with cascading notes. Trills in the higher range sing of rainbows before a plunge to deeper notes underscores the pull of gravity. The music fades on high.

The composer describes the second movement ('*air born*') as a *scherzo*. It begins with a touch of irony: an almost cabaret feel. A repeated high motif has a hypnotic effect; then the introductory theme is presented again. A very delicate passage and the gentle wit of subtle *grupetti* and trills played softly (and then more forcefully) draw on to the *scherzo's* deft conclusion.

'under water', the sonata's slow movement, has a meditative quality. Dreams of Debussy hover on the air, with Mr. Spano's playing at its most ravishing. Contrasting deep tones and sparkling shimmers of high notes are heard; the music then simply evaporates.

A deep, jazzy rumbling pulse opens '*on fire'*, the concluding movement. Trills and delicate flourishes alternate with deeper motifs, displaying by turns the attraction and danger of fire.



LIGHT FOR ALL
THE BALTIMORE SUN

February 11, 2017

A sampling of recent Baltimore-centric classical, jazz recordings

By Tim Smith

JONATHAN LESHNOFF: "Zohar," Symphony No. 2 ("Innerspace"). Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus; Robert Spano, conductor. ASO Media.

Baltimore composer and Towson University faculty member Jonathan Leshnoff has increasingly infused his works with references to his Jewish faith. His Symphony No. 2 ("Innerspace") is deeply rooted in Judaic philosophy, specifically that of Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, but never sounds dryly academic.

The fast movements are propelled by infectious syncopation and orchestral sparkle. The 12-minute slow movement at the center of the symphony finds Leshnoff in deeply lyrical form, but there's tension, too, underlined by Shostakovich-like growling brass and heavy timpani. The finale is a clarinet note followed by more than a minute of silence — extraordinary and affecting.

Leshnoff's impressive "Zohar" for soloists, chorus and orchestra has its roots in Jewish mysticism; the text reflects on the unknowable nature of God. The score is packed with appealing elements — minimalist reiteration and propulsion; jazzy angularity (Bernstein's spirit seems present); an Elgar-like radiance; a wonderful choral fade-out at the conclusion, a la Holst's "The Planets."

Robert Spano conducts both pieces with evident authority and care. The Atlanta Symphony and Chorus are in top form, as are silvery-voiced soprano Jessica Rivera and eloquent baritone Nmon Ford.

Robert Spano

American Record Guide
INDEPENDENT CRITICS REVIEWING CLASSICAL RECORDINGS AND MUSIC IN CONCERT

January/February 2016

THALBERG: *Piano Concerto;* see RUBINSTEIN

THEOFANIDIS: *Creation/Creator*
Jessica Rivera, s; Kelley O'Connor, mz; Thomas Cooley, t; Nmon Ford, bar; Evan Boyer, bass; Shannon Eubanks, Steven Cole, actors; Atlanta Symphony & Chorus/ Robert Spano
ASO 1006—73 minutes

Christopher Theofanidis (b 1967) and the Atlanta Symphony have formed a close partnership over the years, and here is the latest installment in their collaboration. Premiered in Atlanta last April under Maestro Spano's baton, *Creation/Creator* is a work for soloists, actors, chorus, and orchestra that explores the nature of the creative process in science, art, religion, philosophy, spirituality, the acquisition of knowledge, and in our understanding of life. Divided into 13 sections that are sung, narrated, and on two occasions just played, Theofanidis's score engages us in a discussion about how history's most illustrious creators understood the process that led to their creations. Rumi, Melville, Whitman, Dante, James Weldon Johnson, Michelangelo, Chaucer, Rilke, Kafka, Berlioz, Van Gogh, Bach, Schubert, Beethoven Keats, James Weldon Johnson, Margaret Cavendish, Virginia Woolf, Plato, Aristotle, Leibniz, Ptolemy, Einstein, Curie, Huygens, Planck, the Chinese story of Pan Gu, the Hindu *Vedas*, and Judaism's esoteric *Sefer Yetzirah* are just some of the brains Theofanidis picked to come up with his libretto.

But don't expect a droning disquisition on these esoteric ideas. Theofanidis is among our most accessible contemporary composers, and he's nothing if not an engaging colorist. In keeping with that reputation, *Creation/Creator* is a kaleidoscopic score bristling with energy and brilliantly colored musical fun. You sense that right away in the composer's take on the poet Rumi's comment that we can know individual elements in our lives and still be clueless about the big picture. Theofanidis gets us started there with two minutes of brassy fanfares and fizzy choral descriptions of what it's like to encounter an 'Elephant in the Dark'. The underscoring in 'Pan Gu and the Egg Shaped Cloud' brims with clever tone painting, and I admire the two sections for orchestra that expound on the elusiveness of creativity and on Truman Capote's assertion that "the greatest pleasure is not the work itself, but the music it makes." *Creation/Creator* offers us some lyrical moments too. A lovely duet where the soprano and mezzo describe the creative magic of a Vedic dawn is one of them; Rilke's quick but graceful reminder that creativity requires clarity is another.

There's excellent acting to go with all the fine playing and singing. The narration in 'Pan Gu' is full of excitement and wonder. And you have to love the feisty epilogue from Margaret Cavendish's 'Blazing World' where the 17th Century writer avers that authors create worlds that are far more lasting and far less destructive than the ones concocted by politicians and generals.

Will *Creation/Creator* develop the legs to jump into a concert hall near you? I wouldn't presume to know. But here we have it caught in glamorous sound, so don't hesitate.

GREENFIELD

Robert Spano

AUDIOPHILE AUDITION
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August 12, 2014

A bold second take on a seminal piece, plus a new and substantial first symphony from one of the best composers today

By Steven Ritter

CHRISTOPHER THEOFANIDIS: Symphony No. 1; PETER LIEBERSON: Neruda Songs – Kelley O'Connor, mezzo-sop./ Atlanta Sym. Orch./ Robert Spano – ASO Media CD-1002, 66:45 [Distr. by Naxos] ****

It seems that the Atlanta Symphony is not wasting much time in trying to catalog the so-called "Atlanta School" of composers, something that Robert Spano has expended no little time in trying to document. Christopher Theofanidis is a popular composer in the city, and with good reason: his stunning *The Here and Now* to texts by the pseudo-mystical Sufi poet Rumi, was nominated for a Grammy award with the Atlantans, and remains one of the most remarkable choral/orchestral compositions in the last 30 years. This is his first *symphony*, and knowing of his penchant for highly colorful scores and swirling, fireworks-like textures, I wondered how in the world the genre would react to an assault from such a composer.

Actually, very well. Or at least, in terms of the purely musical expression found in the work, it is immensely satisfying, with the four movements playing off one another in a structured and consistently manicured manner, and with a sense of drama and curvature. But you won't find anything here even remotely similar to the great German line of *symphonic* utterance; this is not a developer's delight. Instead, as the composer mentions himself, it is "types of energies." This doesn't mean that his music lacks the more traditional "hooks" that we latch on to; there is melody aplenty, albeit shortly snipped. Yet one does not listen for melody but instead the effect of the whole, and that effect is quite beautiful.

As interesting and rewarding as the *Symphony* is, it is the presence of Lieberson's *Neruda Songs* that most whetted my appetite. This incredible score, which I consider the foremost orchestral song cycle of the last 50 years, was written for the composer's beloved wife Lorraine, and serves as a tribute to her life's work and marvelous artistry. The recording premiere by James Levine and the Boston Symphony was spectacular and as moving as anything you will ever hear. But one of my favorite mezzos, Kelley O'Connor, whose stunning work in Golijov's *Ainadamar* first drew my attention, is no slouch even in

comparison with the immortal Lorraine Hunt. There is not the affectedness of Hunt's performance, who was in the midst of severe illness and transfigures the text into something so immensely private; O'Connor's effort is more forward, even bolder in tone and discernment. But Rumi's texts and Lieberson's music—with whom O'Connor spent a lot of time learning this piece—is pliable enough to establish itself universally and not just as an obituary. O'Connor is young and on her way up, and this had to take a lot of guts to throw herself in the ring—but we are all better for it.

Spano and forces play this music as well as anyone, the conductor's always keen ear for detail giving us a recording of great clarity and very good balance. This isn't a substitute for Hunt's *Neruda*—there will never be one—but it is a great second take, and the Theofanidis work only adds to the desirability in excellent sonics.

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ROBERT SPANO
Discography

NAXOS

8.559913	**HIGDON: Duo Duel/Concerto for Orchestra** ((M. Strauss, S. Stoyanov, percussion; Houston Symphony; Robert Spano; conductor)

ASO MEDIA

CD-1012	**GANDOLFI, PRIOR & OLIVERIO: Orchestral Works** (Mark Yancich & Paul Yancich, timpani; Atlanta Symphony Orchestra; Robert Spano, conductor)
CD-1011	**KURTH: Everything Lasts Forever** (Kelley O'Connor, soprano; Atlanta Symphony Orchestra & Chamber Chorus; Robert Spano, conductor)
CD-1008	**Robert SPANO: Hölderlin-Lieder & Piano Sonata "Four Elements"** (Jessica Rivera, soprano; Robert Spano, piano)
CD-1007	**Jonathan LESHNOFF: Zohar & Symphony No. 2 "Innerspace"** (Jessica Rivera, soprano; Nmon Ford, baritone; Atlanta Symphony Orchestra & Chorus; Robert Spano, conductor)
CD-1006	**Christopher THEOFANIDIS: Creation/Creator World Premiere** (Jessica Rivera, soprano; Kelley O'Connor, mezzo-soprano; Nmon Ford, baritone; Evan Boyer, bass; Atlanta Symphony Orchestra & Chorus; Robert Spano, conductor)
CD-1005	**VAUGHAN WILLIAMS: Dona nobis pacem, Symphony No. 4 & The Lark Ascending** (Atlanta Symphony Orchestra; Robert Spano, conductor)
CD-1004	**SIBELIUS Symphonies No. 6 & 7, Tapiola** (Grammy-nominated for "Best Orchestral Performance." Atlanta Symphony Orchestra; Robert Spano, conductor)
CD-1003	**RACHMANINOFF: Piano Concerto No. 3 - Symphonic Dances** (Garrick Ohlsson, piano; Atlanta Symphony Orchestra; Robert Spano, conductor)
CD-1002	**THEOFANIDIS: Symphony No. 1 - Lieberson: Neruda Songs** (Kelley O'Connor, mezzo-soprano; Atlanta Symphony Orchestra; Robert Spano, conductor)

CD-1001 **HIGDON: On a Wire - Gandolfi: Q.E.D.: Engaging Richard Feynman**
(eighth blackbird; Atlanta Symphony Orchestra & Chorus; Robert Spano, conductor)

TELARC RECORDINGS

TEL-32630-02 **The Singing Rooms: HIGDON: The Singing Rooms; SINGLETON: PraiseMaker; SCRIABIN: Le Poeme de L'Extase** (Jennifer Koh, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus)

CD-80673 **Transmigration: ADAMS: On the Transmigration of Souls; BARBER: Adagio for Strings; Agnus Dei; CORIGLIANO: Elegy; HIGDON: Dooryard Bloom** (Nmon Ford, Baritone; Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus; Robert Spano, conductor)

CD-80696 **GANDOLFI**: **The Garden of Cosmic Speculation** (Atlanta Symphony Orchestra)

CD-80697 **PUCCINI: La Bohème** (Andrew Garland, Christopher Schaldenbrand, Fabio Maria Capitanucci, Stephen Ozcomert, Denis Sedov; Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus; Robert Spano, conductor)

CD-80701 **BRAHMS: Ein Deutsches Requiem** (Mariusz Kwiecien, Baritone, Twyla Robinson, Soprano; Atlanta Symphony Orchestra; Robert Spano, conductor)

CD-80676 **VAUGHAN WILLIAMS: Symphony No 5 / Tallis Fantasia: Serenade to Music** (Grammy-nominated for "Best Orchestral Performance" and "Best Surround Sound Album." Cecylia Arzewski, David Arenz, Reid Harris, Christopher Rex, Jessica Rivera, Kelley O'Connor, Thomas Studebaker, Nmon Ford; Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Atlanta Symphony Chamber Chorus; Robert Spano, conductor)

CD-80665 **SIBELIUS: Kullervo** (Grammy Winner for "Producer of the Year." Charlotte Hellekant; Nathan Gunn, baritone; Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Men's Chorus; Robert Spano, conductor)

CD-80568 **RIMSKY-KORSAKOV: Scheherazade Op. 35 and Russian Easter Overture Op. 36** (Atlanta Symphony Orchestra; Robert Spano, conductor)

CD-80588 **WILLIAMS: Symphony No. 1 "A Sea Symphony"** (Grammy-Winner for "Best Classical Album" and "Best Choral Performance." Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus; Robert Spano, conductor; Christine Goerke, soprano; Brett Polegato, baritone; Norman Mackenzie, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Director of Choruses)

CD-80596 **The Rainbow Body: THEOFANIDIS "Rainbow Body;" BARBER "Symphony No. 1, Op. 9;" COPLAND "Suite from Appalachian Spring;" HIGDON "blue cathedral"** (Atlanta Symphony Orchestra; Robert Spano, conductor)

CD-80620 **HIGDON: "Concerto for Orchestra and City Scape"** (Atlanta Symphony Orchestra; Robert Spano, conductor)

CD-80627 **BERLIOZ: Requiem, Op. 5** (Grammy-Winner for "Best Choral Performance." Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus; Robert Spano, conductor; Frank Lompardo, tenor; Norman Mackenzie, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Director of Choruses)

CD-80638 **DEL TREDICI: Paul Revere's Ride; THEOFANIDIS: The Here and Now**; **BERNSTEIN: "Lamentation" from *Jeremiah*** (Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, Robert Spano, conductor; Hila Plitmann, soprano; Richard Clement, tenor; Brett Polegato, baritone; Nancy Maultsby, mezzo-soprano)

DEUTSCHE GRAMMOPHON

483 5004 9 **NADINE SIERRA: There's a Place for Us** (Nadine Sierra, soprano, with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra & Robert Spano)

477 746-1 **GOLIJOV: La Pasión según San Marcos** (DVD) (Orquesta La Pasión, Biella Da Costa, Jessica Rivera, Reynaldo González-Fernandez, Gioconda Cabrera, Manolo Mairenam, Alex Alvear, Schola Cantorum de Venezuela)

477 642-6 **GOLIJOV: Oceana** (Dawn Upshaw, soprano, Kronos Quartet, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra; Spano, conductor)

477 616-5 **GOLIJOV: Ainadamar** (Grammy-Winner for "Best Contemporary Composition" and "Best Opera Recording." Dawn Upshaw; Kelley O'Connor; Jessica Rivera; Jesus Montoya; Ladies of the Atlanta Symphony Chorus; Atlanta Symphony Orchestra; Robert Spano, conductor)

BRIDGE

9282 **YEHUDI WYNER: Piano Concerto, "Chiavi in Mano" (**Robert Levin, piano, Robert Spano, conductor; Boston Symphony Orchestra; **Cello Concerto, "Prologue and Narrative";** Maximillian Hornung, cello, Susan Davenny Wyner, conductor; Odense Symphony Orchestra; **Lyric Harmony;** Susan Davenny Wyner, conductor; Boston Festival Orchestra; **Epilogue: in memory of Jacob Druckman.** Susan Davenny Wyner, conductor; Odense Symphony Orchestra)

DACAPO CLASSICAL

B07DS3DFXD **EICHBERG: Symphony No. 3; Morpheus** (Danish National Synphony Orchestra; Robert Spano, conductor)

CHANNEL CLASSICS

29410 **BRAHMS/arr. Lazic - Piano Concerto no.3, Rhapsodies, op. 79, Scherzo in E-Flat Major, Op. 4** (Dejan Lazić, piano; Atlanta Symphony Orchestra; Robert Spano, conductor)