

Vancouver Symphony having a resurgence

Crisis averted, orchestra sets sights on building audience



Main photo by Troy Wayrynen/The Columbian Bruce B. Dunn, trumpeter and music educator with the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra, plays in Vancouver's Esther Short Park. (Troy Wayrynen/The Columbian) [Buy this photo](#)

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Acclaimed conductor, pianist and violinist Awadagin Pratt, top, and baritone Stephen Salters will perform with the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra on Sept. 8 in Esther Short Park.

A traditional four-movement symphony generally works like this: A big, commanding beginning is followed by a slow and solemn second movement. The third movement is a dance and the fourth is a boisterous race to a grand finale.

Right now, the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra seems to be someplace between movements three and four. Major blues behind it, the orchestra is dancing with its community while getting ready for a joyful resurgence in its 2013-14 season.

You can join the dance Sept. 8 as the VSO returns to downtown Vancouver with a free outdoor concert for the first time in five years. The show is set for 3 p.m. in Esther Short Park. The orchestra will be led by special guest conductor Awadagin Pratt, and the featured singer will be Stephen Salters. April Baer of Oregon Public Broadcasting will emcee.



The crowd-pleasing program includes the overture from Verdi's "La forza del destino," "Old American Songs" by Aaron Copland, "Slavonic Dances" by Dvorák, a selection of gospel spirituals and, as the finale, what must be the most famous symphony ever: Beethoven's Fifth. Before all that, children will be able to test out orchestra instruments, thanks to a "musical instrument petting zoo" sponsored by Beacock Music.

"We are so happy to be able to give the gift of music back to the community after such a long absence," said VSO board chairwoman Kathy McDonald. "This is a chance for families to gather in a beautiful setting to listen to their community's great symphony."

The free concert isn't really, free, of course; it's been facilitated by a round of targeted fundraising by the auxiliary Friends of the VSO organization. "It's a healthy sign that the community put up the money for this," said board member David Smith, who noted that orchestra support from local businesses all but disappeared when the Great Recession hit.

ESTIMATED TOTAL AMERICAN ORCHESTRA REVENUES IN RECENT FISCAL YEARS

The consistent main source of orchestra revenues is private donations, hovering at 39 to 40 percent; ticket sales always come in second, at around 35 to 37 percent.

2002-03	\$1.357 billion
2003-04	unavailable
2004-05	\$1.44 billion
2005-06	\$1.66 billion
2006-07	\$1.77 billion
2007-08	\$1.77 billion
2008-09	\$1.69 billion
2009-10	\$1 billion

Source: League of American Orchestras

Now, the orchestra is hoping this ticketless outdoor concert convinces people to buy tickets to its 2013-2014 season. "We are really trying to ignite the community's passion," said orchestra executive director and principal clarinetist Igor Shakhman. "We are trying to reach a bigger audience."

The business side

Shakhman was born in Ukraine and studied clarinet at a Moscow conservatory. He studied music in several American schools and earned his Ph.D. from the University of Colorado. Eventually he played with touring

companies that brought "Oklahoma!" and "Fiddler on the Roof" to major cities all across the nation.

He learned a couple of important things on the road, he said. One: "I loved Portland. It was beautiful, gorgeous. I loved the food and the people. After January in Minneapolis and Wisconsin, it was just wonderful." He and his wife decided to move there permanently -- and he successfully auditioned for the principal clarinet chair with the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra.

The other thing he learned was the "power of good marketing and the power of stars" to fill an auditorium -- even in places like Arkansas, he said. "Even in this economy, in economically underprivileged places, it was incredible -- the shows were sold out," he said. His fascination with "the business side" of the music led him to apply for the open job of orchestra manager and librarian in early 2011.

He'd barely begun his new job, he said, when the orchestra "hit a huge crisis." In May 2011, the organization's bookkeeper broke the news that the orchestra was "over \$100,000 in arrears without any obvious way of coming out of it," said McDonald. In its 35-year history, McDonald said, the Vancouver Symphony has never come closer to shutting down completely.



Instead, the Friends of the VSO group launched an emergency fundraising drive that hauled in \$144,000 in a few short weeks -- literally saving the orchestra from collapse. "We thought it would be shameful to close our doors without even letting our supporters know we were in trouble," said Smith. "They really came through for us."

It's a familiar refrain: nonprofit organizations have struggled to stay afloat during the recession, with arts organizations harder hit than others because they're not considered essential. Even before the recession hit, the overall audience for live classical music dropped 29 percent from 1982 to 2008, according to the League of American Orchestras. Newer statistics aren't available, but in recent years several prominent orchestras have cut musicians' and conductors' pay, declared bankruptcy or gone out of business altogether.

McDonald isn't interested. The professional political strategist and former staffer for U.S. Rep. Linda Smith is unwavering in her belief that a community that insists on great schools, great libraries and great employers also needs and deserves great classical music. "I see it as a huge community piece," she said. "It's a business that makes us a whole community."

To keep the business solvent, though, she had some tough cost-cutting decisions to make. The VSO's paid office staff once peaked at five; now it's down to 11/2, with executive director Shakhman the only full-time worker. Volunteers and board members are crucial to keeping the operation alive, she said.

Busy freelancers

The orchestra used to rehearse in its regular performance space, Skyview High School's acoustically excellent -- and expensive to rent -- auditorium; now it often opts for Club Green Meadows, which is much more affordable, McDonald said. The orchestra also gained the free use of a small suite of offices on Main Street from NW Equity Holding; the arrangement is a "blessing," McDonald said, and her fingers are crossed that the rent freedom continues.

Even the orchestra's beloved maestro, Salvador Brotons, "kicked back his whole salary," said McDonald. Brotons, who lives in Spain, set down roots in this area while teaching at Portland State University, Smith said. "He loves this community. His daughter was born here," McDonald said. (She added that locals may not appreciate just what a "rock star" Brotons is on the international classical music scene.)

The thing that didn't get cut is VSO musicians' pay. "You don't cut your talent, you cut your administration," McDonald said. "We had way too much overhead."

The 70 or so non-unionized musicians of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra are reasonably -- but not handsomely -- compensated "per event," Shakhman said. He didn't want to get into specifics. "We would love to pay our musicians more. Our goal is to attract the best musicians," he said. Competing with the higher-paying Oregon Symphony and other groups south of the river is impossible, he said -- but the VSO has the charismatic Brotons as one incentive. As a working clarinetist, Shakhman said he finds Brotons "inspiring and exciting."

Since its musicians tend to be freelancers and teachers with busy, complicated schedules, the VSO schedules its concerts on Saturday afternoons and Sunday evenings -- reversing typical weekend evening and matinee performances -- so that its players can make it to more lucrative Saturday-night shows in Portland and elsewhere.

"We know our musicians are underpaid, so we try to support them in other ways," said Shakhman. He said the VSO's budget is approximately 70 percent "artistic" and 30 percent administration.

According to its most recent filing with the Internal Revenue Service, the VSO took in \$362,000 in fiscal 2011 -- that's nearly \$200,000 less than the previous year -- and spent \$334,000. Those numbers are pretty paltry for an orchestra of this size and quality -- but nonetheless, McDonald said, "a huge cheer" went up at a board meeting last year after it was announced that the organization was back in the black.

Deep pockets wanted

Still, institutions that used to be reliable orchestra backers have wavered. "Banks are not great community partners anymore," McDonald said. Smith extended that to the commercial sector in general; during that summer 2011 scramble for emergency donations, he said, it was individual donors -- not businesses -- that came through.

Plus, several skeptical board members stepped away when McDonald pared the front office and embraced the model of a top-flight professional orchestra managed largely by a hands-on board of directors and supported by a volunteer organization. She's looking for new board members who have passion for classical music, management skills -- and "deep pockets," she said.

The orchestra did win a \$30,000 grant from the Meyer Memorial Trust that is aimed specifically at marketing to a younger audience. That should help drive attendance at its second Skyview concert of the year, set for Nov. 2 and 3 and featuring young harmonica virtuoso Joe Powers on the flashy "Five Pieces for Harmonica and Orchestra" by Gordon Jacob.

Special guests -- like Jacob in November and Pratt and Salters on Sept. 8 -- cost money, Smith agreed, but they drive ticket sales too. A typical VSO weekend of two Skyview concerts sells 1,200 to 1,400 tickets, he said, but there's room for more in the 1,100-seat auditorium. This year's guest-heavy "Season of Stars" was a deliberate decision to spend money in order to make money, he said.

Similarly, the orchestra is always seeking a balance between artistically challenging pieces and those classic hits -- like Beethoven's Fifth on Sept. 8 and the "1812 Overture" in November -- that reliably sell tickets.

But ticket sales don't really support the orchestra the way underwriting by individuals and corporate partners does, he said.

To support its musicians with more gigs -- and to continue getting its name and its music in front of the public -- the VSO has planned a series of chamber-group concerts at Kiggins Theatre, and free lunchtime concerts in the first-floor lobby of the Firstenburg Tower at PeaceHealth Southwest Medical Center, beginning in October. (Details are still forthcoming.)

Go to vancouversymphony.org to purchase tickets, individually or in blocks, for Vancouver Symphony Orchestra events and to learn more.

"We're convinced, if we do our job right and provide great quality, the audiences will attend," said Shakhman. "If it's an exciting show, we'll fill the hall."

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