

## Vancouver Symphony bulks up to play Mahler

### Complex piece demands extra instrumentalists

By James Bash for The Columbian

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#### **If you go**

**What:** Vancouver Symphony plays Mahler's Symphony No. 5 and Franck's "Symphonic Variations" with pianist Darlene Cusick.

**When:** 3 p.m. Saturday and 7 p.m. Sunday.

**Where:** Skyview High School Concert Hall, 1300 N.W. 139th St., Vancouver.

**Cost:** \$50 for reserved seats, \$35 for general admission, \$30 for seniors and \$10 for students.

**Information:** 360-735-7278 or visit [Vancouver Symphony Orchestra](#)

The Vancouver Symphony Orchestra will take on one of the largest mountains of musical literature this weekend, playing Gustav Mahler's Fifth Symphony. It's a large-scale work that lasts more than an hour and involves at least 90 musicians. That's 20 more than the orchestra has on its regular roster. Funding for the extra instrumentalists and extra rehearsal time has been provided by longtime supporters Neal and Joyce Arntson.

The score places incredible demands on each musician, because of the many exposed passages, requirements for tight ensemble playing, and huge dynamic swings from whispering pianissimos to thundering fortissimos. The sweeping dynamic range of the piece should lie to the strength of Music Director Salvador Brotons, who is well-known for his emotional style on the podium.

"Mahler is very meticulous in his intentions," Brotons said. "He explains to the smallest detail how he wants his music to be performed. Because his symphonies are very diverse, conductors have to understand the geography of his music. They must have a very clear vision of the piece."

The five-movement work begins with a treacherous trumpet call and a slow march in C-sharp minor. The responsibility for establishing the mood will fall on the shoulders and lips of principal trumpeter Bruce Dunn, who sees it as the opportunity of a lifetime.



"When I first heard the Mahler 5th, I was 18 years old and in college," said Dunn, who lives in Vancouver. "Ever since last spring when the orchestra announced that it had scheduled this symphony, I pulled out the first trumpet part and started working on it. The last three or four months have been really intense, getting into this music. For the opening measures, Mahler wrote, 'Strong, in time, like a funeral procession,' but we have a lot of playing to do past that point. It's a major undertaking for the brass sections."

Many people will recognize the beautiful and melancholy music of the fourth movement, the "Adagietto," which features only the harp and strings. Mahler wrote it for his wife, Alma. It was later used as the theme music for the movie "Death in Venice" and is often used in memorial concerts, such as those given for the victims of 9/11.

The fifth movement leads to a sunny finale, but it's not a straightforward path. Amid pastoral tunes are a few detours that delve into conflict, contrast, obsession and excess. Getting to the final destination in a Mahler symphony is never easy, but his music can give the audiences an experience that they will never forget.

In contrast to the roller-coaster ride of Mahler's music, the concert will begin with Caesar Franck's "Symphonic Variations," featuring pianist Darlene Cusick as guest soloist.



"I've been practicing the piece since May or June of last year," Cusick said. "I do a lot of repetition and analyze the music while I'm learning it. That helps me to memorize it faster. "

The "Symphonic Variations" is a one-movement work that lasts around 15 minutes.

"The piece has two parts to it," Cusick said. "The first half is more introspective, and the second half, which begins with the trill, is very upbeat, cheerful, and triumphant. It's a terrific Romantic work and very beautiful. "

Franck was a French composer who was acclaimed as a pianist and organist. That sits nicely with Cusick, who maintains a piano studio with two pianos (a Mason & Hamlin and a Bösendorfer). For the past 25 years, she has been the organist at Valley Community Presbyterian Church. Cusick has a bachelor's degree in music from Lewis & Clark College and a master's degree from the University of Washington. In 2010, she performed the "Andante" from Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 21 with the Vancouver Symphony.

"The wonderful thing about Franck's piece is how the music flows from theme to theme with subtle variations that change in style and mood," Cusick said. "Sometimes the orchestra has the theme, and the piano adds ornamentation."

This is the first time that Brotons has conducted the "Symphonic Variations" with the Vancouver Symphony. He has performed it many times with other orchestras, including a year ago with his orchestra in Barcelona, Spain. He will also be conducting it in December in Israel.

"The 'Symphonic Variations' is a gorgeous work," Brotons said. "It has a lot of delicate passages for the orchestra and offers a perfect blend between the orchestra and the piano soloist."