

music matters

Gregory W. Heltman discusses the Santa Fe Symphony's storied past and vibrant future

by Amy Hegarty

SINCE ITS FIRST, groundbreaking concert in 1984, the Santa Fe Symphony Orchestra & Chorus has gone on to celebrate almost three decades' worth of music-making. In advance of kicking off the ensemble's 28th season on October 9, Gregory W. Heltman, the orchestra's founder and general director (as well as one of its trumpet players), reflects on what it took to get the organization to where it is today and the direction he'd like to take it going forward.

Founding a symphony orchestra is no small task. Can you say a few words about how and why you decided to undertake such a thing?

In the summer of 1984, I and several dozen other musicians were performing in a Santa Fe orchestral organization that no longer exists. After approaching management on a number of major issues, which ultimately led to all of the musicians being fired, one of the board's directors said that if we didn't like how they ran the group, then we should start our own orchestra. So that was the trigger. It became very important to us that we show the community the caliber of players who had been fired, so we gave a concert on September 2, 1984. There was a great committee of musicians who helped bring the concert together. We raised

\$1,800 at the door (the cost of admission was a free-will donation) and that was our stake hold in starting the symphony.

What were the biggest challenges you faced?

We had no money, no infrastructure, no office, etc.—I ran everything from my kitchen table and an overstuffed briefcase—but the biggest challenge was developing support in the donor circles. We had to overcome many, many naysayers.

Now, here you are, 28 seasons later. What does the repertoire for the 2011–2012 season look like?

It covers works from the baroque period to the 21st century. Some of the highlights include Richard Strauss's *Don Juan* and Respighi's *Pines*

of Rome; our collaboration with the Santa Fe Institute for the third Voyages of Discovery concert, called *Bach on the Brain*, which explores music, language, and the brain through works written and inspired by J.S. Bach; Sibelius's Symphony No. 2; Brahms's *A German Requiem*; and Stravinsky's *Firebird*. We're presenting three international prizewinners throughout the season, and we're collaborating with the First Annual Santa Fe International Marimba Festival at the end of the season.

People associate Santa Fe with art, but what's your impression of Santa Fe as a music town?

I'm regularly approached by people who've moved here from much larger metropolitan areas and are amazed at the variety and caliber of our performing arts. They're excited



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by the fact that, in a city with a standing population of about 65,000, the Santa Fe Symphony is truly a well-honed professional symphony orchestra that compares most favorably with the orchestras these new-comers left behind in cities like Detroit, San Diego, and Boston, to name just a few.

Is the classical music scene in Santa Fe different today than it was when you founded the Santa Fe Symphony?

Yes. The competition is greater. The variety of offerings are more diverse. The expectations of the audience are ever higher. And, even in an arts mecca like Santa Fe, we face the same issues of attracting and growing audiences that are confronting the performing arts in cities from Philadelphia to Cleveland to Chicago.

As you just suggested, the arts, like everything else during this recession, are struggling nationwide. What do you think when you hear about musical organizations filing for bankruptcy or shutting their doors?

Our society is changing very quickly. The challenge is: can the model of the symphony orchestra be reengineered to align with the new paradigm of the on-demand, ultra-convenient, high-definition, wireless world? Can we, in the performing arts, repackage the communal experience of a live concert in such a way that the value of attending a live performance is perceived as worthwhile?

How does that challenge motivate you?

I spend a lot of time thinking about how to bring popular attention to symphonic music, just as, say, a TV show like *Dancing with the Stars* does for ballroom dancing. Classical music isn't as difficult or elitist as it's been made to appear. It's not a matter of "dumbing it down"; it's a matter of showing how exciting and inspiring and sensual classical music is. **sf**

Opposite page: Gregory W. Heltman (far left) plays the trumpet in the Santa Fe Symphony Orchestra & Chorus, which he founded in 1984.

PETER BUREGA

OCTOBER 21 - NOVEMBER 6, 2011

Opening Reception: **FRIDAY, OCTOBER 21, 5 - 7pm**



Crooked Island, 2011, oil on panel, 48 x 48 inches



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