

ENTERTAINMENT

Boulder Philharmonic Orchestra reaches out in ways that befit its unique hometown



The Phil's season subscriptions are up 39 percent since the 2009-10 season, and attendance increased 40 percent from the 2009-10 season to the 2010-11 season alone. Provided by Boulder Philharmonic Orchestra

By **SABINE KORTALS** and **SPECIAL TO THE DENVER POST** | The Denver Post

PUBLISHED: February 22, 2012 at 11:20 a.m. | UPDATED: May 1, 2016 at 6:54 p.m.

It's generally understood that American orchestras are challenged as never before.

Whether you blame a prolonged economic recession, an outdated business model, rising costs, more diversified audience tastes or all of the above, orchestras around the country are facing budget shortfalls and declining attendance.

While the Colorado Symphony Orchestra looks to a fresh, consumer-focused approach to secure its financial future and better connect with audiences, the Boulder Philharmonic Orchestra has been quietly experimenting and innovating outside the spotlight.

"We're not just trying to attract patrons, we're trying to build a real connection between the orchestra and the community," said Michael Butterman, the Phil's music director since 2005. "Concerts are a gateway opportunity for people to connect to us."

According to Jeffrey Nytech, director of the Entrepreneurship Center for Music at CU-Boulder, that's precisely the kind of thinking that's needed to turn things around.

"Community engagement is key," said Nytech, who moderated a local panel discussion last month on the future of orchestras in troubled times. "In the last decade, a number of studies have shown that attendance for traditional fine-arts events is on the decline, which has set off a chain reaction.

"Presenting organizations have pulled back their programming, and pulled back from the community ... when instead they should be experimenting with programming and thinking well beyond the passive experience of the concert hall."

For Butterman, that means embracing and reflecting what he calls "the spirit of Boulder."

"It's a crowded landscape here," he said, noting nearby ensembles like the [Boulder Bach Festival](#), the Colorado Music Festival and the CSO. "So we spent some time visioning, surveying and really thinking about how to create a relationship with our audience ... not just as an orchestra in Boulder, but as Boulder's orchestra.

"What's Boulder all about? It's a highly educated, well-traveled community. We have scientists and outdoor enthusiasts. And there's a fondness for exploration and

discovery, as well as an expectation and affection for the familiar monuments of the repertoire. Our programming is the result of this composite personality.”

Such keen attention to capture what makes the community unique is paying off. The Phil’s season subscriptions are at a seven-year high, up 39 percent since the 2009-10 season, and attendance increased 40 percent from the 2009-10 season to the 2010-11 season alone.

Concerts often spotlight Boulder’s own creative talents, as well as widely known artists with Boulder connections — from pianists Christopher Taylor, David Korevaar and Hsing-Ay Hsu to composers Daniel Kellogg and Bill Douglas, as well as collaborations with organizations and ensembles like the Ars Nova Singers, Boulder Chorale, Boulder Ballet and Colorado Shakespeare Festival.

As well, Butterman introduced a “Discovery” series to fourth- and fifth-graders in the Boulder Valley School District. “We target students right when they have the opportunity to start learning an instrument in school,” he said of the grass-roots effort. “The idea is to create a spark of inspiration, and help them develop a relationship with music.”

“Michael Butterman Goes to School” is another outreach program by which the 45-year-old maestro is building rapport with area music educators and students through classroom visits.

Additionally, the hometown, professional orchestra is expanding its regional presence with concerts in Lakewood, Highlands Ranch, Arvada and the Vilar Performing Arts Center in Beaver Creek.

“Like any per-service orchestra, our musicians are contracted players,” said Butterman. “The Boulder Phil isn’t their chief source of income. And when you don’t play together every day, you have to continually re-establish the unity and artistic quality of the orchestra as a whole.

“So how do you get an orchestra to play together more often? By repeating your concerts in other venues, which the Scientific & Cultural Facilities District has helped us to do.”

That said, the Phil has down-sized its office space, and its minimal staff relies on a hands-on, working board to help keep down expenses. Said Butterman, “Through some trial and error, I think we’re becoming both more efficient and more artistically relevant over time.”

“THE CREATIVE AND THE GREAT” Featuring cellist and 2011 TED fellow Joshua Roman in Friedrich Gulda’s Cello Concerto. Also on the program are Shostakovich’s Jazz Suite No. 1 and Schubert’s Symphony No. 9 in C Major (“The Great”). 7:30 p.m. Saturday, CU-Boulder’s Macky Auditorium. The program repeats at 3 p.m. Sunday, St. Luke’s Methodist Church, 8817 S. Broadway, Highlands Ranch. Note: On Sunday, Peter Mathys, winner of the Boulder Philharmonic’s Young Artists Competition, performs the first movement of Rachmaninoff’s Piano Concerto No. 2 in place of soloist Joshua Roman. **Tickets, \$5-\$70, are available at 303-449-1343, ext. 2 or boulderphil.org.**