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Great ambitions for symphony

BY DANIEL CHANG

dchang@MiamiHerald.com

Miami Symphony Orchestra sees an opening in South Florida's shifting classical music scene: arts groups that are struggling with uneven ticket sales and diminished donations are canceling concerts, paring down performances, and filing for bankruptcy.

Yet the Miami Symphony, long dismissed as second rate by critics and South Florida's cultural establishment, has launched an aggressive expansion -- recruiting a new slate of board members, targeting a budget growth of 50 percent and increasing the number of concerts from this year's 10 to 16 next season.

Conductor Eduardo Marturet concedes that the symphony will have to invest years before it becomes the fulltime ensemble the region has lacked since the 2003 bankruptcy of the Florida Philharmonic Orchestra.

"We are at 10 percent of where I think the orchestra is going to be," he says.

NOW'S THE TIME

But Marturet is certain that now is the time to grow, despite the financial crises that have beset arts groups and their benefactors.

"The crisis for an organization like ours was going to be more helpful than damaging," he says, "because we had no choice but to grow or disappear."

Marturet took over musical direction of the orchestra after its founder Manuel Ochoa died in 2006. And he has been a change agent ever since: adopting a more rigorous musical repertoire, in part to weed out unfit musicians; taking the symphony to the recording studio for its first album, and evangelizing to the board of directors on the need for greater financial investment and broader representation in its ranks.

"A fresh approach to orchestra management is really prevailing," says concertmaster Daniel Andai.

"It's like a gem that needs to be polished to become a precious stone," says Rafael Diaz-Balart, board chairman. "We are going to get there."

SEEKING DIVERSITY

Getting there will take more money, Diaz-Balart says, and, perhaps more important, a change in the orchestra's image as a predominantly Hispanic cultural group.

“It operated and developed very much as a Cuban-American, Hispanic organization for many years,” Diaz-Balart says. “And, I think, as a result of that aspect of the organization, we encountered certain -- not necessarily obstacles -- but we were not properly represented on the board of directors by all the communities that exist in Miami, and as a result our outreach into the different communities . . . was hampered.”

Founded in 1989 by Cuban immigrants -- Ochoa, and his wife, Sofia, who recently retired as executive director -- Miami Symphony long recruited board members and musicians who were most familiar to its core leaders.

That meant the symphony, its leadership and its supporters were largely homogenous.

But if the symphony is going to become “a Miami-wide organization,” Diaz-Balart says, then it needs more diversity on its board and on stage.

So Marturet has begun auditioning musicians from as far away as Korea, and Diaz-Balart has launched an initiative for performances in new neighborhoods and venues, such as Riviera Country Club and the Biltmore Hotel in Coral Gables.

Andai, named concertmaster in 2008 after almost a decade with the symphony, says the level of playing has improved under Marturet.

“People in the orchestra now are far more prepared,” he says. “The musicians themselves in the orchestra are talking. They are taking the orchestra far more seriously.”

REACHING OUT

Ralph Patino, a Coral Gables lawyer who joined the board in January, leads the orchestra's outreach efforts and expects them to pay off with more donations and volunteers.

“You cannot reap seeds that you haven't planted,” Patino says. “In order to ask people to support the symphony financially, the community has to get to know the symphony.”

Observers of South Florida's classical-music scene are cautiously optimistic about the ensemble's evolution.

Julian Kreeger, president of the Miami presenting group Friends of Chamber Music, says the symphony's new leadership is beginning to have a positive effect where it matters most, on stage.

“Marturet is to be commended for trying to raise the quality of the orchestra, and for what he has managed to achieve in a relatively short time,” Kreeger says. “It is encouraging that he has expanded the orchestra's repertoire,” including some Mahler symphonies and Gustav Holst's *The Planets*.

MONEY MATTERS

Still, Diaz-Balart says he aims to increase the orchestra's annual budget from \$1 million in 2008-09, to \$1.5 million in 2009-10. Much of the increase will have to come from donations.

“Our fundraising from the private sector in the past had been completely inadequate,” he says, “because we had not gotten ourselves together enough to go after the private funding.”

Though its fundraising goals are more modest than those of larger cultural organizations, the symphony faces a grim economic climate for nonprofit arts groups.

Miami City Ballet, which no longer performs to live music, has laid off dancers and pared its \$14.8 million annual budget to slightly more than \$11 million.

Florida Grand Opera cut its \$14-million annual budget about 30 percent, froze wages and canceled a concert series.

And the Concert Association of Florida, once the major presenter of classical music in Miami-Dade and Broward, filed for bankruptcy liquidation in February.

The Concert Association's closure widened the void left by the 2003 bankruptcy of the Florida Philharmonic and the demise of Broward Friends of Chamber Music.

Smaller groups, such as Firebird Chamber Orchestra and Boca Raton Symphonia, have emerged to help fill the void, but Diaz-Balart says Miami Symphony is positioned to become the region's resident professional orchestra.

“It is our moment to make it, because there is a vacuum,” he says. “We all know that.”

Marturet is not entirely encouraged by the potential opportunities for Miami Symphony.

“If such a strong organization as the Concert Association of Florida happens to go,” he says, “it means some things about the community, the way arts and culture are working in the city.”

Marturet says he is pleased that the Cleveland Orchestra performs an annual, three-week residency in Miami, but he craves a more permanent presence for classical music. Money alone, he says, won't accomplish that goal.

“Money helps a lot,” he says, “but . . . first of all you need strong artistic leadership and a goal. We have to know where we're going.”

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