

by Chester Lane

Team

From conductorless concerts to partnerships with corporations and schools, the Memphis Symphony Orchestra is aiming to reinvent itself as an indispensable community resource.

Ruth Valente Burgess,
principal cello in the
Memphis Symphony
Orchestra and a mentor/
teacher at Soulsville
Charter School, with
Soulsville seventh-grader
Ashley Burkes

Players

Anyone who attended a subscription concert by the Memphis Symphony Orchestra this season is likely to know that 2009-10 was a transitional year for the organization. David Loebel wrapped up his eleven-year tenure as music director at the end of last season, and 2009-10 was planned as a season of guest conductors who would lead concerts pending the installation of his successor. Among the guests was Mei-Ann Chen, the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra's assistant conductor and League of American Orchestras Conducting Fellow. Chen brought a program of Adams, Beethoven, and Dvorák to Memphis last fall, and in

February of this year was announced as the next music director of the orchestra, effective with the 2010-11 season.

But a parade of guest conductors and the selection of a new music director have by no means been the only harbingers of change at the Memphis Symphony. More profound, though perhaps less obvious to the MSO's immediate circle of subscribers and patrons, are the changes now underway as part of an evolutionary shift in the 58-year-old orchestra's relationship with its community. Something more unusual than a transition to new artistic leadership has been going on.

For fans of classical music, the most visible manifestation of this is Opus One—a musician-run concert series, spearheaded by MSO Concertmaster Susanna Perry Gilmore, that made its debut this season. Following a test run in December for members of the MSO's inner circle, the musicians participating in Opus One performed two public concerts *sans* conductor, in spaces radically different from the Cannon Center, home of the MSO's main classical season, or its smaller venue in the suburbs, Germantown Performing Arts Centre.

On March 4, Opus One offered "Four Bs"—a novel mix of Bach, Beethoven,

Seated with participants in a Leading from Every Chair workshop held in April 2008, Memphis Symphony Orchestra musicians including Susanna Perry Gilmore (red shirt) listen to directions from the podium.



and Big Band—at One Commerce Square, in the grand lobby of a building formerly occupied by SunTrust Bank. The second Opus One concert, on May 20, showcased in turn the strings, winds, and brass—music from Grieg’s *Holberg Suite*, Richard Strauss’s *Wind Serenade*, Henri Tomassi’s *Fanfâres Liturgiques*—followed, after the break, with a string quartet performing original charts in collaboration with the noted Memphis soul and folk rock singer-songwriter Susan Marshall. For this program the venue was even more unusual: a downtown performing space known as The Warehouse, frequented by many of the city’s non-classical performers but actually the large living-room of a home owned by businessman and local music promoter Kris Kourdouvelis.

In addition to selecting the repertoire and handling all aspects of concert production for Opus One, MSO musicians had studied up on the art of conductorless playing,

As President and CEO Ryan Fleur sees it, the MSO’s ability to develop programs that meet community needs is in part based on identifying “hot-button issues” like leadership development at a big local corporation. “That’s not a need that you would normally associate with an orchestra,” he says.

first as observers at a rehearsal of the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra in New York City last October and subsequently in coaching sessions with individual Orpheus members in Memphis. Tickets to the Opus One concerts, priced at an affordable \$25 (\$15 for students), were sold through the MSO box office, but marketed and publicized by orchestra members themselves. A mid-winter press release promoting the March concert as a “chance to mingle with the orchestra in a cocktail party atmosphere” went out jointly from the MSO marketing department and from Joseph Salvalaggio—with no mention of the fact that Salvalaggio was also the MSO’s principal oboe.

Opus One was launched with help from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, which in 2007 had selected the Memphis Symphony and three other orchestras to participate in a New Strategies Lab as



Publicity for Opus One included this image of MSO Principal Oboe Joseph Salvalaggio; a release announcing the musician-run concert series listed him as press contact.

Wayne Joseph Campbell, Jr.



A participant in the MSO’s April 2008 *Leading from Every Chair* workshop takes the baton from then-Music Director David Loebel.

Brandon Dill

part of the Mellon-funded Orchestra Forum. As a concert series that capitalizes on the MSO’s artistic strengths while empowering musicians well beyond the traditional paradigm of a symphony orchestra, it is but one of the many new strategies now playing out at this orchestra. Equally significant are *Leading from Every Chair*—an innovative workshop and rehearsal-demonstration project that has brought MSO musicians individually and collectively into intimate contact with professionals from the city’s business community—and a teaching/mentoring partnership with Soulsville Charter School, an institution dedicated to steering less privileged members of the city’s young population toward college through a disciplined environment and a curriculum centered on music.

The out-of-the-box thinking that lies at the heart of such programs as Opus One, *Leading from Every Chair*, and the partner-

ship with Soulsville resulted last year in the Memphis Symphony being singled out for one of five case studies to be included in a book that the League of American Orchestras would produce and make available to the orchestra field. Commissioned through a grant from MetLife Foundation, the book is called *Fearless Journeys: Innovation in Five American Orchestras*. Every League member orchestra is receiving a copy, and the entire book will be posted on the League’s website, americanorchestras.org.

As for the innovative nature of Opus One, MSO President and CEO Ryan Fleur says that recent economic conditions had forced the orchestra to make some “drastic decisions. We cut 30 percent of our staff, and a good number of our subscription weeks. From that void we laid the groundwork for innovation. We’ve been able to accelerate the creative possibilities, and Opus One is a great example of that.” But while



Memphis Symphony Orchestra

budgetary concerns may have been a factor in the establishment of a musician-run concert series, *Leading from Every Chair* and the Soulsville partnership have been undertaken not as immediate earned-revenue enhancers or audience builders, but in direct response to community needs.

And the foundation for all of these innovations was laid as far back as 2003, Fleur's first year as president, when he and Loebel paid a visit to the mayor of Memphis. As the authors of *Fearless Journeys* write in their Memphis chapter, Fleur "surprised everyone on that visit. Instead of asking for help from the city, he asked the mayor how the orchestra could help him and the city of Memphis. From that moment, he changed the nature of the MSO's cultural contract with the city by presenting himself as a different kind of leader, one with a new vision for the orchestra and a unique understanding of its role in Memphis and the Mid-South."

Ears to the Ground

Dan Poag, a prominent real estate developer and immediate past chair of the MSO's board of directors, says that soon after he joined the board early in Ryan Fleur's tenure as chief executive, he "got involved in a strategic planning effort that Ryan was leading. I kept listening to the same things that symphony people always talk about when they get together to discuss their

problems. I finally said, 'Let's stop for a minute and ask this: why should someone who doesn't really care about our music care whether our organization lives or dies? If we can't answer that, then I question whether we deserve to live.' People started thinking, and that's what really led to these relationships." Poag is referring both to *Leading from Every Chair*, which began as a pilot project with employees from FedEx Corporation, headquartered in Memphis, and to the teaching-mentoring project, which is very much a partnership with the city's Soulsville Charter School.

Lisa Dixon, the MSO's chief operating officer, says that both relationships began to take shape in 2007 during a week-long retreat in Princeton, New Jersey, funded by the New Strategies Lab grant and facilitated by EMC Arts. Along with Loebel, Fleur, Poag, Dixon, and two musicians from the orchestra, the retreat participants included Marc Willis, then the director of Soulsville Charter School, and Anita Angelacci, a FedEx human resources professional who at that time was responsible for leadership development programs at the company. The retreat became a kind of "incubator for developing relationships," says Dixon. Essential to that process was learning about the needs of these two very different Memphis-based organizations, and determining what the orchestra could do to help meet those needs.

"Leadership development and talent retention was one of the hot-button items that came up as we learned about the core values of FedEx," says Dixon. "We picked that up as a place where we could develop a relationship—supporting those values through what the orchestra inherently had to offer." As Angelacci explains it, *Leading from Every Chair* came about as "a collaboration with everyone from the symphony, including musicians, the conductor, Ryan and Lisa. We knew it would be intriguing to see how a symphony works, what makes the team successful, what the leadership is like, and how all this translates to a corporate environment. I brought in people from FedEx for the pilot, then we fine-tuned it and facilitated the program for some of our marketing managers." This was a day-long seminar that included personal encounters between MSO musicians and the FedEx employees, hands-on experiments in music-making by the latter, and an afternoon rehearsal at the Cannon Center, with participants seated first in the audience and then onstage among the musicians.

"We broke up into teams so our people could visit the woodwinds or the brass or the strings," Angelacci recalls. "Managers asked musicians about their lifestyle—they were intrigued, because it's so different from what they do every day. Musicians talked about their roles and who the various kinds of leaders were. Then the managers were invited up on stage and embedded themselves in the orchestra. The orchestra would play a little and we'd have more discussion.

"It was so eye-opening for the managers. They learned that they don't have to have all the answers—they can also rely on the people who work for them. I remember one manager talking about how important it was not just to listen to people's words, but to pay attention to the other ways

"I have taken a very supportive role with Opus One," says Music Director Designate Mei-Ann Chen. "I want to give musicians the flexibility to be creative, and I think they've found a neat way of building audiences that would never come to us in a traditional setting."



Rosalie O'Connor

Memphis Symphony violinist Marisa Polesky with Orpheus Chamber Orchestra musicians Jonathan Spitz and Carl Albach at a coaching session in conductorless orchestral performance last December



Jeno Leibel

they're communicating, so they understand what their employees are actually saying to them. And there were lessons about finding somebody's talent and capitalizing on it: if you put the right person in the right job and use that talent, the person will be happier and the team more successful. I still get people telling me this was one of the best leadership classes they'd ever taken. What I now admire about the symphony is that they realize they have to be relevant. Mak-

ing beautiful music is certainly important, and that will never go away. But there are other ways to be relevant, and that's what we were exploring."

Since its debut with FedEx, *Leading from Every Chair* has been presented for employees of AutoZone Inc.—another large Memphis-based company—and for members of the local chamber of commerce. Gilmore says the seminar is now being adapted for use with a local high school

as a leadership seminar for young people.

As Fleur sees it, the orchestra's ability to develop programs that meet community needs is in part based on identifying "hot-button issues" like leadership development at a big local corporation. "That's not a need that you would normally associate with an orchestra," he says, "but it's part of our strategy for survival, and for overall revenue development." Fleur notes that one of the FedEx managers "was so taken with *Leading from Every Chair* that he wanted to give back in some way. He offered to help us build a great website for the program. We said 'that's wonderful, but you know, our main website is kind of lousy.'" The ultimate result of that conversation was not just an online presence for *Leading from Every Chair*, but a revamped site for the whole orchestra: the re-launch of memphisymphony.org this winter was made possible, says Fleur, through "about \$100,000 of in-kind development that cost us about \$5,000. It was entirely FedEx's doing, because of the work we had done with *Leading from Every Chair*."

Direct revenue from the seminar has been slow in coming, but Dixon says that ideally *Leading from Every Chair* will become "a for-fee type offering, just like any other leadership development program. It can be repeated as many times as we can find people who want to go through the program. At the time we launched it, the economy was turning upside down and professional-development budgets were being slashed. But I'm confident that it's going to take off, especially as things recover."

For the Soulsville partnership, Dixon says that what the orchestra picked up on during the Princeton retreat was the school's need to "provide strong role models and mentors for their students, on a consistent basis. When we first went to Princeton, Marc [Willis] was kind of skeptical of the whole thing. He was very protective of his students—they have adult figures come in and out of their lives that they can't depend on, and he wanted to make sure he could trust the symphony to deliver. He said, 'you can come once a day, once a week, once a month, once a year, but it just needs to be consistent, and we need to be able to count on it.' We decided that once a week was the right frequency. Our musicians teach them how to play their instruments and they talk about music a lot, but it's more than that.



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They'll ask them how school is going, what they did over the holidays. The music is really a means to having our musicians become strong role models for these students."

Now in its third season, the Soulsville project has added one grade each year and currently involves students (mostly string and percussion players) in grades six, seven, and ten. Jennifer Puckett, the MSO's principal viola and one of about twelve mentors from the orchestra, says that turnover in the school's music faculty has been dispiriting to some students, and "seeing someone consistently [from the orchestra] is really important to them." The need for occasional one-on-one counseling sessions with the Soulsville kids regarding personal issues has caused Puckett to draw upon skills beyond those required with her private students. "But I personally love teaching," she says, "and am enjoying the mentoring program."

Just as with *Leading from Every Chair*, the Soulsville activities have not been a source of direct revenue for the orchestra. But Fleur says that because of this program, there are two funders—International Paper and a foundation that chooses to remain anonymous—that have become "very substantial backers of the Memphis Symphony, and would not under any other circumstances have supported an arts organization."

Pulling Together

All of these innovative activities now underway at the MSO involve musicians. And a cornerstone of the orchestra's new paradigm is the flexibility of its contract with those musicians.

"It's different here than anywhere else," says Dixon. "Each musician has a contract to sign, and they can check three different boxes. One box is just for rehearsals and performances. Another box is called an artistic engagement contract, where they receive additional compensation for projects like Soulsville, or *Leading from Every Chair*, or other activities in which music and their instrument are integrally involved in what they're doing as part of a partnership. Putting a concert series together would come under the third box, which we are calling 'capacity building' for want of a better term. The rehearsals and performances for Opus One would be covered by the first box, but all the work they do behind the scenes—getting the program together, producing the concerts, generating buzz—falls under

capacity building." According to Gilmore, for the first year of Opus One there were "about sixteen musicians, or slightly more than half of our full-time core," who elected to help out with non-musical aspects of the series through the capacity building contract—an option that has also put musicians to work in such areas as grant writing, library research, and web design.

Fleur notes that Opus One, in the way that it's being marketed and presented by

the musicians, "may come across as a vagabond thing with a life of its own. But we've been very deliberate about having it not spin off and become its own thing. We're making sure that it's truly integrated with all of our concert series while still having its own brand and identity."

The concept of a musician-run series performed without a conductor is wholeheartedly endorsed by the MSO's incoming music director. Mei-Ann Chen says that

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when she initially auditioned for the job, “I had to ask them, ‘Are you sure you need a conductor? If you’re looking to be the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, that’s the end of my expertise.’” But clearly it was not the MSO’s intention to become a conductorless orchestra. Opus One, says Chen, “is a way to provide the musicians with a chance to play together more often, to strengthen the ensemble. I have taken a very supportive role, and I appreciate that the Opus One musi-

cians are working with me on repertoire. I don’t know exactly how it’s going to work out, but what’s so beautiful is that everybody is willing to work with each other so much. I want to give them the flexibility to be creative, and I think they’ve found a neat way of building audiences that would never come to us in a traditional setting.” As of early April, plans were shaping up for an Opus One concert next winter that would complement Chen’s “Italian Inspirations”

program, one of the five country-themed subscription pairs she will conduct during her debut “Season of Discovery.”

A highlight of that season will be the world premiere of a new Osvaldo Golijov work, commissioned by a consortium of more than 30 orchestras in honor of former League of American Orchestras President and CEO Henry Fogel. It’s part of an October 10 “Hope in America!” program that also includes music by Barber, Copland, and Joan Tower. Chen says the Americana theme was something of a personal statement. A native of Taiwan who received a master’s degree in both violin and conducting from New England Conservatory and a doctorate in conducting from the University of Michigan, she notes that “America is a big melting pot. This country has given me a chance to fulfill my dream, and I’m very grateful that a music director with my profile is being accepted in Memphis.”

Chen’s resume includes not only extensive string training but also five years as music director of the Portland Youth Philharmonic in Oregon, and she expects to become involved in teaching and mentoring activities at Soulsville. “For me, education is not *work*: it comes from the heart, because you are making a huge difference in someone else’s life.

“One of the things that drew me to this orchestra was its innovative way of thinking. I have artistic vision for the orchestra locally, regionally, and nationally. And I see my role as being the unifying force—galvanizing all of this bubbling energy, taking it in one direction but also having enough flexibility to let the energy continue to flow. We are trying things that many other orchestras might not even dare to talk about. I’m glad to be joining the orchestra at this crucial moment, because I strongly believe that a new era is starting.” **S**

CHESTER LANE is senior editor of *Symphony*.

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