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Big sky, big rep:  
Music Director Allan Scott, originally from Philadelphia, has ambitious plans for the Helena Symphony.



# Helena Symphony

Music Director Allan Scott

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# Big Sounds Big Dreams

by Jennifer Melick

Carlo Ponti Jr., the San Bernardino Symphony's music director, has made a point of stretching his musicians by performing more challenging standard repertoire—anything from Mahler to Schubert and Mozart.

Music Director Paul S. Phillips has made contemporary music and new commissions a focus of the appropriately named Pioneer Valley Symphony, in Massachusetts.

# Pioneer Valley Symphony

Music Director Paul S. Phillips



Steve Brown photography

## San Bernardino Symphony

Music Director Carlo Ponti Jr.

**It takes ambition and creativity** to pull off a high-quality performance of challenging repertoire when your annual budget is a quarter—or a tenth—the size of the country's top-tier orchestras.

Living in an age when the level of playing in professional orchestras is at an all-time high offers many happy consequences for classical-music lovers. One is that we can expect any orchestra to conquer pretty much any musical challenge thrown its way. Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*? Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony? Janáček's *Glagolitic Mass*? No problem—and probably not even cause for an attack of nerves in the musician ranks—if the orchestra in question has major resources at its disposal. What does raise eyebrows is a non-brand-name orchestra with a small budget taking on, say, a Mahler, Nielsen, or Sibelius symphony, for this must be done without the phalanx of management, board, and support staff available at bigger orchestras. ▶

Sarah Churchill/Pioneer Valley Symphony Orchestra

To find out what goes on behind the scenes to produce some of these more ambitious programs, we talked to music directors and management at three orchestras, none of which is ranked higher than Group 6 by the League of American Orchestras. (Group 6 orchestras have annual budgets of less than \$1 million. By comparison, Group 1 orchestras, such as the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Boston Symphony Orchestra, have a minimum annual budget of \$14,400,000.) While not intended to be comprehensive, this survey gives an inkling of the multitude of challenges facing smaller orchestras, and some of the ways they meet them. In Montana, one orchestra is in the middle of a multi-year cycle of Mahler symphonies; in western Massachusetts, another is dedicated to performing new works; and a southern California orchestra is strengthening its musical forces by tackling a variety of challenges, including Mahler, Schubert, and Sibelius.

#### Mahler in Montana

**A**t the Helena Symphony, an orchestra of contracted players that performs in Montana's tiny state capital, about 200 miles northwest of Yellowstone National Park, Music Director Allan Scott programmed his first Mahler symphony ("Resurrection") in 2005, to celebrate the orchestra's 50th year. Mahler quickly became an annual tradition, with the orchestra performing more than one symphony in some years and the final symphony scheduled for 2012. "We're in this unique area of the country—there's so much that just has not been done, Mahler being one of them," Scott says. The musicians "know that going through the journey of Mahler can be overly intense. Every rehearsal can be

#### Helena Symphony

**FOUNDED:** 1955

**CONCERT PROGRAMS THIS SEASON:** 8

Sample 2007-08 repertoire: Nielsen Symphony No. 4, Mahler Symphony No. 3, Berlioz *Symphonie fantastique*

**BUDGET:** \$600,000



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heartbreaking and emotionally exhausting. But the rewards are so enormous musically, and they really pay off when you share it with an audience." The musicians aren't the only ones who savor the experience: Scott reports that the orchestra's second-highest box office every season is the annual Mahler concert.

For each concert, the orchestra gets between four and six rehearsals the week before the event. Scott acknowledges that while his orchestra will never be the peer of fabled, world-class ensembles, "I don't think that's the goal. The goal is to do it very well, to achieve greatness while you're doing it." He says his musicians are fully up to the challenges he throws at them, but there are unexpected hurdles. "When I announced the repertoire last year and said we were doing Mahler 3, I kind of glanced over at the principal trombone and was waiting for his jaw to drop. It's the longest and hardest trombone solo there is. And I noticed there was no look. I called him

"Going through the journey of Mahler can be overly intense. Every rehearsal can be heartbreaking and emotionally exhausting. But the rewards are so enormous musically, and they really pay off when you share it with an audience."

—Allan Scott, Music Director,  
*Helena Symphony*

into my office and said, 'You know, this is really important!' [Laughs] So I made sure he had his music in June, and I even gave him a couple of recordings." In the end, says Scott, the trombonist stole the show. "It's not so much diversity in ability, it's diversity in pure exposure. In many ways, they're discovering this music for the first time, much as the original orchestra did when they played it under Mahler. It can

The Helena Symphony Orchestra's summer outdoor concerts, like this one last July on the Carroll College lawn, regularly attract audiences of 15,000 to 18,000.



Helena Symphony's trombone section

© 2008 Allen S. Lefohn

be frustrating, because it takes more time. But it's exciting, too."

The Helena Symphony administration and board have signed onto Scott's vision. Mary Williams, executive director since February 2007, says that the orchestra's budget has increased from \$200,000 five years ago to almost \$600,000 today; during the same period, according to Scott, administrative staff has grown from

three to seventeen. "What Maestro Scott brought with him is a large orchestra view," Williams says, "and he has convinced our board that we really can support that view." She notes that under Scott's leadership the quality of the orchestra's playing has skyrocketed, while behind the scenes the orchestra has undertaken a big effort to generate new revenue via fund raising and increased season subscriptions. "We have also been careful not to price ourselves out of the market," says Williams. "Montana is a state where people don't earn much, and if we want to attract larger audiences we have to make attending affordable, as well as interesting and entertaining." She says it helps immensely that Scott participates actively in marketing each concert with radio and television appearances and "chatting up everyone he meets." For his part, Scott says the board has supported his musical interests. "They said, 'We hired you to bring an artistic vision. We set the mission, now you bring the vision.' And the vision is

# Wish List

If your orchestra had a bigger budget, what would you do with the money? Three music directors respond.

**PAUL S. PHILLIPS:** After making sure all our bills were paid and loans repaid, and tucking away some money in our endowment,



I think the first thing I would do is increase the salaries of our staff and add more staff members. There is much more we could do in terms of audience outreach, competitions for young composers and soloists, and even recording if we had a larger administrative staff that could devote more time to these projects. We have the will and talent to be more active in these areas, but there is a limit to how many projects we can undertake with a small overworked staff without burning them out. Other initiatives we could undertake with a larger budget would be to create a fund for performance of new works to cover rental fees and commission costs; create another fund to allow us more leeway in hiring extra musicians; rent a larger office; and add more outreach, education and family concerts to the season. Being able to do all of this—that would be a dream come true.

**CARLO PONTI JR.:** Four rehearsals per concert instead of three. We actually do wonders with only three. But I would really like another one.



**ALLAN SCOTT:** What a question—a blank check! I would certainly not take away from the multi-year Mahler cycle, but bring more of it. Offer another opera and perform in some of the underserved areas of the region. The fact we are bringing in more than 15,000 people to an outdoor (non-pops) summer concert tells me that people will come to hear and see performances of great music. Our job as conductors of orchestras in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is akin to that of a curator of great art—we are there to show the art in all its glory, mystery, contradictions, fun, and questions. The biggest problem is: so much music, so little time.





The Pioneer Valley Symphony's current season, themed "Youthful Visions," opened with this concert featuring Barber's Overture to *The School for Scandal*, Bernstein's *Fancy Free*, and Puccini's *Messa di Gloria*.

not just in the music, but in everything we do. I think what makes us relevant is that we're the talk of the town when we perform in Helena, Montana: Very few people dare to present anything else."

Scott explains that his aim is to include exposure to all forms of music: "We've done Beethoven 5. But when we do Beethoven 5, we put it with Shostakovich 12. I do a meet-and-greet in the lobby at some of the concerts, and particularly with concerts that I know might have been a difficult listen, I want to know the listeners' reactions. And it's fine when audience members say, 'Oh my God, what was wrong with all that noise?' And I say, 'I know. Wasn't that exciting?' The idea is that it's okay for music to just be a splash of sound sometimes, and they realize that they don't have to get something profound out of it every time, that it can just be exciting."

Scott thinks his greatest recent musical challenge probably came last season with Christopher Rouse's *Phantasmata*, which he describes as "essentially atonal" and very challenging rhythmically. He says the orchestra told him it was the best thing they ever did in terms of growth, because it demonstrated that "there's nothing we can't play. We know rhythmically we can put things together."

Scott adds, "I don't think about, 'Oh, we shouldn't do *Rite of Spring*.' I might think, 'Well, okay, I might want an extra rehearsal on that.'"

### O Pioneers

At the Pioneer Valley Symphony, based in Greenfield, Massachusetts, performing works by contemporary composers like Christopher Rouse is just part of the standard mix. Under Music Director Paul S. Phillips, who has helmed the mostly volunteer orchestra since 1994, concertgoers have heard Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, as well as Wagner's *Tristan* Prelude, Schoenberg's film music, and numerous Mahler symphonies, but what makes the group distinctive is the many new works it programs. Among them is Rouse's Flute Concerto. Pioneer Valley performed it in a February 2006 concert with soloist Carol Wincenc, who had premiered the work in 1994 with the Detroit Symphony and recorded it with the Houston Symphony for Telarc. "I think Paul wanted to have that particular challenge for his orchestra, and they pulled it off. Really, it was stunning," says Wincenc. "Everybody just exploded at the end.... It's not your classic soloist/accompaniment. It's a complete dialogue—the flute responds to what's going on in the orchestra and vice versa."

"There was a kind of a passion and excitement in the performance here that was very apparent," Phillips says.

The orchestra's adventurous spirit is what brought Phillips, a composer and director of orchestras and chamber music at Brown University, to western

"Playing a Beethoven or a Sibelius symphony can be among the most extreme challenges. Everyone has the sound of the Berlin Philharmonic, the New York Philharmonic, etc., in their ears for those pieces. When we play a less familiar piece, some of that pressure is removed."

—Paul S. Phillips, Music Director,  
Pioneer Valley Symphony

Massachusetts in the first place. He still remembers his first meeting with orchestra members, who sat down with him and started telling him works they'd like to play. Several of them said, "Can't we play some Nielsen symphonies?" And I thought, this is a really extraordinary request to be hearing. So there was that kind of culture in the orchestra when I arrived, and all I tried to do was tap into it and find a kind of harmonious concord with a will that already seemed to exist."

Phillips says the PVS, which rehearses once a week during its fall-through-spring season—about eight rehearsals per concert—has an unusually collaborative process for choosing repertoire. "Each fall, once we've played the first concert, we convene a meeting where anyone who's a



Sarah Churchill/Pioneer Valley Symphony

**PVS Executive Director Constance Clarke runs the business side of an ambitious orchestra that has a budget of just \$218,000.**

member of the board of directors, a member of the orchestra, or a member of the chorus is invited to come to a kind of brainstorming session. We start throwing out ideas—and I'm just one more person

## Pioneer Valley Symphony

**FOUNDED:** 1939

**CONCERT PROGRAMS THIS SEASON:** 6

Sample 2007-08 repertoire: Kraft Concerto for Timpani and Orchestra, Stravinsky Mass, Vaughan Williams *Sea Symphony*

**BUDGET:** \$218,000

S Y M P H O N Y



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in that meeting." When the orchestra performed Peter Boyer's *Ellis Island: The Dream of America* in 2004, says Phillips, "The orchestra—and fortunately, our audience—got a tremendous thrill out of this. We had a big audience, the people who saw it were just spellbound, and we did something unprecedented: So many people asked us to perform the piece again that we did it for two consecutive seasons, performing concerts six months apart just for people who said, 'I want to come back and see it again, and I want to bring my friends with me this time.'"

Phillips says that often the biggest challenges for the PVS are the large standard-rep pieces. "For an orchestra that is not a full-time orchestra, where the level of technical expertise is not the same level that you'll find in the Cleveland Orchestra, playing a Beethoven or a Sibelius symphony can be among the most extreme challenges. Everyone has the sound of the Berlin Philharmonic, the New York Philharmonic, etc., in their ears for those pieces, and that can be daunting. So even though an orchestra can play it—and the Pioneer Valley Symphony can play it very well—it may not be perfect, where you're

used to that perfection from recordings. So in a way, when we play a less familiar piece, some of that pressure is removed."

Executive Director Constance Clarke, who joined the PVS in 2006, says that one of her most important jobs is to "encourage the board of directors to be feisty and entrepreneurial about the PVS as the really good small local community symphony it is, and be the unabashed advocate for the symphony with everyone I meet. If someone tells me, 'Oh, I don't like classical music,' I offer them free tickets with 'Just try it!'" Having grown up going to PVS concerts under longtime music director Nathan Gottschalk, who was beloved in the Pioneer Valley, Clarke says she still enjoys the orchestra's close involvement in the community. "I chuckled last summer

"Mozart and Schubert are the most challenging to do because of intonation. It's *very* difficult to play really in tune—it's very transparent."

—Carlo Ponti Jr., Music Director,  
San Bernardino Symphony

San Bernardino Symphony winds and brass at one of the orchestra's six annual concerts



Steve Brown Photography

Steve Brown photography



Carlo Ponti Jr., San Bernardino Symphony's Rome-born music director, now looks forward to giving pre-concert talks, which are less common in Europe.

when Paul Phillips and I were out getting lunch and a woman came up to him on the sidewalk with a kind of awe and said, 'You're the conductor of the Pioneer Valley Symphony!' And they chatted, as folks do in a small town."

### California Dreams

**T**he San Bernardino Symphony started off its 79<sup>th</sup> season this past September with Mahler's Fourth Symphony—on only two and a half rehearsals. Music Director Carlo Ponti Jr., who has led the group since 2001 and just extended his contract through 2009-10, says the group normally gets three rehearsals per concert, but lost about half of the first rehearsal getting his musicians properly positioned onstage at the California Theater in downtown San Bernardino, where concerts take place. "I was so stressed," says Ponti, who is also an associate conductor with the Russian National Orchestra, based in Moscow. In

the end, though, he was happy with the results. "It's the only Mahler symphony that doesn't end with a bang, so I was a bit concerned about that, but the public loved it, *loved* it."

Ponti programs works like the Mahler to stretch the orchestra, to push for a more substantial sound from the strings. "We have a limited budget, so it is something that we don't have the luxury of doing often. People said the Mahler Fourth is the most simple of his symphonies, but it's a tremendously difficult thing to play because of how it's written for the specific instruments. It's very much like a chamber piece—very much like Mozart, in a way." Ponti has also been programming Mozart to stretch the musicians, and Schubert as well; in March they take on his Symphony No. 2. "Mozart and Schubert are the most challenging to do because of intonation. It's *very* difficult to play really in tune—it's very transparent. The scoring and the cues are easy, but when you actually put it

into practice, intonation is just—Ah!—it is *so* difficult, Schubert especially. When a whole section is on the E string, it's just—oh my God."

Ponti and his orchestra—many of whose musicians teach and also play in local orchestras like the Riverside Philharmonic and Redlands Symphony Orchestra—are in a rebuilding phase; after a period of operating in debt, they are in the black since receiving a bequest from longtime board member Frank Plash last summer, which not only erased the debt but established an endowment. Concerts

## San Bernardino Symphony

**FOUNDED:** 1929

**CONCERT PROGRAMS THIS SEASON:** 6

**SAMPLE 2007-08 REPERTOIRE:** Mahler Symphony No. 4, Schubert Symphony No. 2, Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 3

**BUDGET:** \$800,000

Carlo Ponti Jr.,  
San Bernardino  
Symphony's music  
director

regularly attract audiences of about 1,200 in the 1,700-seat California Theater. Ponti says that when he came on board six years ago the average audience size was roughly 500 to 700, but has grown along with an increased marketing budget. It probably helps create extra buzz in southern California that Ponti is from Hollywood royalty: He is the older son of Sophia Loren and the late film producer Carlo Ponti. Though Ponti says that he'd like to program new works as well as more angular music by Stravinsky or Janáček, he feels that in general the San Bernardino audience is more at home with melodic pieces.

That jibes with his main goal at this point: "to concentrate on the core repertoire, to really get that under their fingers." Executive Director Carlotta Mellon says that the reaction of musicians, audience, and board to the Mahler Fourth this fall was "tremendously favorable, so much so that Maestro Ponti has included

Mahler's Fifth Symphony in our 2008-09 season." Like Ponti, Mellon also hopes to see the orchestra expand in new directions down the road. "As we continue to play pieces like the Mahler Fourth and Fifth symphonies, we stretch both our audience and our musicians. I think symphony orchestras have an obligation to educate as well as to entertain, and I think audiences like occasionally to hear unique compositions that show a composer's deep talent."

One of the things Ponti likes best about leading a smaller orchestra is the excitement concerts generate among the musicians and in the community. "So many concerts nowadays are just—you have big names and you have big orchestras, but they're boring. You don't remember what the conductor has conducted the next day.... I have the luxury of not having to do too many concerts, of not being overwhelmed, so every concert is very much a detailed work for me. It's not something that I just crank out, and that's a luxury that I'm very grateful for. So every concert is an event for me, every one. And I think the audience feels that, and tremendously appreciates that."

#### Home Sweet Home

Talking to these orchestra leaders, it's abundantly clear how much they relish their close involvement in the community. Phillips, whose Pioneer Valley Symphony musicians come from an area dominated by five colleges, proudly talks about conducting what he calls "the brainiest orchestra around." None of these orchestras' music directors seems eager to leave.

The year Phillips was asked to be music director at the PVS, he was also asked—the very same day, as it happened—to be music director of another orchestra. "The other orchestra was offering me

four times the salary, a much bigger-budget operation. But that other orchestra was committed to very traditional programming"—and he loved leading an orchestra that was "hungry for more adventurous repertoire."

At the Helena Symphony, Scott is quick to point out that that city was recently ranked as the sixteenth best arts community in the U.S., one of the important factors that caused him to change his permanent residence from Philadelphia (where he also conducts the North Penn Symphony) to Helena. "I've always had Philadelphia as my home, regardless of where I've conducted. And my first two years here, I even said, don't even ask: I'll never be living here, I'll be commuting. After two years here, I switched my residences, and I now commute to Philadelphia. No one is more shocked than me."

Ponti also has a permanent residence in the San Bernardino area. "It is a labor of love for me," he says. "I really feel privileged to be at this orchestra and to be its conductor, because it's such a wonderful feeling to be at one with the orchestra. It's a collaborative effort, and that makes it even better." ∞

Jennifer Melick is managing editor of SYMPHONY. From 1991 to 2005 she was an editor at *Opera News*.



Steve Brown photography



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