Garden State Philharmonic Turns 60

By: Victoria Ford



Conductor Anthony LaGruth.
Photo credit: GSP

"It's an uphill battle for classical music," according to Garden State Philharmonic Artistic Director and Conductor Anthony LaGruth, who has led the organization through 15 successful seasons. Candidly, he said the genre is somewhat in a state of flux – "at a crossroads." It has its longtime loyal supporters, but it needs an ever-growing base of new supporters to remain relevant, which means "people have to be open to what's new and different."

The music itself is still as great as ever – the trouble is the average attention span is about eight seconds, LaGruth said. Society today is not in the mindset to "go for the ride" to wherever the music leads, which, in LaGruth's view, points to a fundamental issue: "We need to get back in touch with our humanity."

The exuberant and animated music man is well known for his rapport with audiences and his community outreach programs; his innovative approach to orchestral performance; his versatility, refinement and control; and his entertaining pre-concert discussions, "Musically Speaking," on various topics pertaining to the Philharmonic and surrounding culture.

Off all the questions he fields after concerts, "Why?" is the question more people should be asking. Intellectual curiosity is waning, he fears.

"Music is a tremendously powerful component of the world we live in," he said.

Many understand that music is inherently emotional, he said, but why does it sound a particular way? Answering that question forms the basis of his life's work. It is what it is, and it has an impact, he said – "but the more you know, the closer you get to understanding the 'why.'"

His objective as an artistic director is to "bridge gaps," both between the classical and modern worlds, and between older and younger listeners. The Music for Young People program brings live chamber ensemble assemblies to schools, as well as hands-on demonstrations to classrooms and Young People's Concerts, which unite participating students and professional musicians, free to the public. These activities teach kids about orchestral music, instruments, science of sound, concert behavior and the growing list of ways they can get involved in music.

Continued on page 12

GSP from page 11



Opening Reception.
Photo credit: GSP

Despite the changing tastes of popular culture, classical music stands the test of time and still has something to say, LaGruth said, "because it teaches you something new." For years and years, the same music is continually enriching. Bear in mind," he noted, "Mozart began his concerts with an overture that was the 'pop music' of 1780."

Earlier this year, at a kickoff event held at the Jay and Linda Grunin Center for the Arts at Ocean County College, LaGruth and other Philharmonic officials gathered to celebrate the organization's mission and vision. The VIP event was catered by Serenity Café, with wines provided by the Toms River law firm of Carluccio, Leone, Dimon, Doyle and Sacks. The special presentation, led by Ken Malagiere, president of the Board of Directors and affectionately dubbed "Ocean County's Ryan Seacrest," emphasized the transformative power of music and hailed the GSP as cultural resource.

The Philharmonic is "part of what we need to make a complete culture," according to Estelle Brodkey, a past president of the GSP. Her first introduction to classical music was in cartoons, she said, and the impact even then was a lasting one.

"All it takes is a spark," she said. The simplest connections can expand minds and horizons.

Of all the reasons to look forward to the milestone season of programming, Brodkey said, "I'm most excited that this culture (of music) has existed for 60 years in this town." She added, "After I sit and hear the concert, I say, 'It was worth it,' despite the struggles of the board's work."

The traditional concert format hasn't changed, LaGruth said, but "we're changing things up a bit" for the 60th season, working in some surprises that will capture and keep people's attention. The concert world is changing, the music is constantly evolving, and the GSP is evolving and looking for new ways to bring people into the concert hall, to meet them on a level they feel comfortable with, he explained.

The Philharmonic's Managing Director Thomas Stephens declared the 60th anniversary season would be a season like no other: eclectic, vibrant, designed to capture the essence of what music is – and isn't. The organization has been built upon its commitment to the community, driven by the idea to "Let's look at history, but let's go beyond that." Today the idea reaches even further: "Let's tie music to healthy living."

The GSP is proud to call OCC "home" (as orchestra-in-residence) and "partner"in the pursuit of fostering classical music appreciation through conventional and innovative means, Stephens said. He talked about "pairing what we do best with a charity partnership" and integrating the Philharmonic into therapeutic environments, i.e., hunger-and aging-related causes such as Meals on Wheels and adult communities, because "music feeds the soul."

Continued on page 13

GSP from page 12

"It's about putting great ideas together," he said.

LaGruth addressed the room with a simple appeal for a brighter tomorrow: We live in a world that needs more beauty, less ugliness, he said. And he has more than a few ideas about how to achieve that goal.



Opening Reception.
Photo credit: GSP

The season would open in August with a "birthday party" concert with a '60s theme – 1860s and 1960s. Think Bach to Beach Boys. Beethoven to Bee Gees.

Coming up on Oct. 17, it's Scandinavian Soundscapes. From "the land of majestic gods, untouched landscapes and evocative music" comes Finnish composer Jean Sibelius' "Symphony No. 2 in D Major," Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg's "Piano Concerto," with featured highlights from the Scandinavian rock band ABBA's "Mamma Mia."

December 12 will bring Operation Opera!, showing how lyrical phrases are spun into idioms of the day, e.g. O Solo Mio, which means "It's now or never." Working in all these parallels, humor and plenty of costume changes, LaGruth said, assures the performances are not merely concerts but rather "quite the party."

As next spring approaches, set aside March 12, 2016 on the calendar for "Muse of Fire," starring David Katz in his acclaimed one-man play with music, about the life of a conductor.

Next May 22, the season will close with a piece that has no equal, he concluded: Beethoven's "Symphony No. 9 in D Minor," at St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church in Toms River. "The Ninth" is among the most humanistic and most powerfully moving works in history, LaGruth said, and it is timelier right now than ever.

Music must reflect the time in which it's written, while still being meaningful in the time in which it's heard, LaGruth mused. The symbiosis of conductor and orchestra together is what makes the experience unique.

To be a conductor, according to LaGruth, "You have to be willing to undress your soul."



Cedar Bridge Tavern's annual commemoration of the 1782 skirmish to be held on **December 27, 2015**