

# Garden State Philharmonic's New Executive Aims to Bridge Gaps, Reach Out, Connect



## Spring Schedule at a Glance

(see event listings for full details)

*Sunday, March 2*

**Young People's Concert**  
**What Makes Music American?**  
Toms River H.S. North Auditorium

*Sunday, March 9*

**With Voices Raised**  
Garden State Philharmonic Chorus  
Calvary Lighthouse Church, Lakewood

*Sunday, March 15*

**Irish Spring**  
Strand Theater, Lakewood

*Sunday, March 30*

**Exploring American Genius**  
**American Women Composers**  
Ocean County Library, Toms River

*Saturday, April 26*

**Classical Constructions**  
Strand Theater, Lakewood

*Sunday, April 27*

**Exploring American Genius**  
**American Diversity**  
Ocean County Library, Toms River

*Saturday, May 10*

**The Dvorak Effect**  
Strand Theater, Lakewood

*Sunday, May 18*

**POP Goes the Pops!**  
OceanFirst Theater at Stafford Township  
Arts Center, Manahawkin

*Thursday, May 22*

**The Bard on Broadway**  
Choral Cabaret/Silent Auction  
Location TBA

**W**ho says the executive director of the Garden State Philharmonic can't be a heavy metal fan?

Sean Baker, a trained professional classical double bassist and lover of Renaissance and Baroque musical styles, is also the owner of an extensive Metallica collection. Incidentally, he finds himself listening to a lot of Radiohead and Björk nowadays. And those aren't the only surprises he has up his sleeve.

Baker was born in Mexico and has lived in Wisconsin, Florida, Texas, Minnesota and New York. He has covered a lot of ground in his not-yet-30 years and has a wealth of experiences, both professional and personal, to show for his travels.

It all adds up to a great fit for the Garden State Philharmonic, which is presently exploring ways to incorporate more and different kinds of offerings into its calendar of subscription performances and special events, across genre and cultural boundaries.

Just before landing at the Jersey Shore Nov. 19, Baker had spent two years as general manager of the Chelsea Symphony and in other arts management positions with the New York City-based Orchestra of St. Luke's, the Greenwich Village Orchestra and the Philharmonic Orchestra of the Americas. His work has afforded him a broad understanding of how orchestras work, from the vantage points of musician, freelancer and administrator.

In New York he gained a thorough behind-the-scenes perspective of those organizations, each at a different point in

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in its evolution, from being totally volunteer-driven to having a full staff of paid professionals.

He said he feels fortunate to have had a career thus far marked by well-timed opportunities.

Baker studied music as an undergraduate at the University of Minnesota and earned his master of arts in orchestral performance from the Manhattan School of Music, where he also managed the community outreach program. It was while at the Manhattan School of Music that Baker really developed his taste and skill for orchestral management and administration, he said.

By the time he was graduating from high school, Baker had made up his mind about pursuing music as a career, and in graduate school he further narrowed his professional goals, feeling he wanted to contribute to both the performance and management aspects of the orchestra business. He said he was driven by the desire to counter a certain disconnect he had observed between the two, believing communication and mutual appreciation are the keys to an overall healthy and prosperous orchestra.

Indeed, it is his blend of experience as both musician and manager that makes him uniquely qualified for the position of executive director of the Garden State Philharmonic, according to search committee chairwoman Judith Leone. With one adult orchestra, three youth orchestras and one chorus to oversee, the broader his knowledge base, the better.

It was "quite a search" that led the Philharmonic's board of directors to find Baker, Leone said.

"We have great hopes for him," Leone said. "... We're really pleased he wanted to move to the suburbs."

In Leone's opinion, a successful executive director must be, above all, a people person, with the ability to lead, motivate, get along well and communicate effectively with volunteers, the staff, the musicians, the board members and the public. As such, he should be "out there in the forefront, making friends, not problems."

Luckily for Baker, making friends seems to come easily – a trait perhaps he picked up while learning to adapt to so many new places.

"I really had to hit the ground running," he said of his entrée into the Philharmonic. As a result, the time since he started has flown, he said. And while he feels he still has a lot to learn, "I'm getting my bearings pretty well."

"It's nice to be able to feel like I can stay in one place," he added.

Among many other things, he said he is interested in strengthening the already solid relationship between the musicians and the administration, grateful for the longstanding precedent set by conductor and artistic director Anthony LaGruth, of community outreach and audience interaction.

"Working together, everyone is able to inform everyone else's opinions," he said, "(and) it's possible to move forward much more quickly."

In Baker's opinion, the measure of a truly great orchestra is one wherein "the musicians can intuit, through the interpretation of the conductor, what the other musicians ... are going to do at any given moment."

When the members of an orchestra get along well, the chemistry comes across loud and clear to the audience, he explained. Along the same lines, the more physically expressive the musicians are in their playing, the more the audience gets out of the performance, both visually and aurally.

Therein lies one of the Philharmonic's ongoing goals, to break down or reach across what is known in theater as "the fourth wall," the invisible barrier between performers and the audience. Again, LaGruth has already laid the groundwork by speaking about music to audiences in ways they find relatable.

At the same time the Philharmonic strengthens relationships within the organization – it also fosters partnerships with three other important community organizations, namely Ocean County College, the Strand Theater and the Stafford Township Arts Center.

The Philharmonic also places a strong emphasis on reaching out to the classical musicians of the future, through channels such as the hands-on Music for Young People program, funded by the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. The program culminates in a free family concert at Toms River High School North on March 2 at 3 p.m. The show is titled “What Makes Music American?” and features the music of Aaron Copeland, Leonard Bernstein, George Gershwin and John Williams.

The following week, on March 9 at 3 p.m. at the Calvary Lighthouse in Lakewood, the Garden State Philharmonic Chorus and the Shrewsbury Chorale perform “With Voices Raised,” Mario Lombardo’s Three Psalms for Chorus and Orchestra.


On Saturday, March 15 at 8 p.m. at the Strand Theater in Lakewood, the Philharmonic presents “Irish Spring,” featuring concertmaster Heather Bixler on violin.

And on March 22, it’s “The Bard on Broadway,” a choral cabaret and silent auction, which centers on the theme of how William Shakespeare inspired some of the greatest Broadway composers of the past century. If last year’s event is any indication, tickets are likely to sell out.

For a complete 2008 schedule and additional information about how to purchase tickets, visit [www.gardenstatephilharmonic.org](http://www.gardenstatephilharmonic.org).

Of the utmost importance to Baker, as a human being and as a musician, is balancing the demands of his position and administrative tasks with the flow of communication and his connection with the music. In order to keep his feet on the ground, Baker said he makes time to play as much as he can.

At press time, Baker was looking forward to returning to New York in the final week of January to attend the League of American Orchestras’ annual Mid-Winter Managers Meeting. He recalled a workshop at last year’s conference called Essentials of Orchestra Management, which he had found especially useful. This year’s event promised to be just as enlightening.

Whether or not Baker is, at first glance, everything one would expect in a philharmonic executive director, he is quickly proving to be everything one could hope for. 

- Victoria Ford

