

THE WHOLE WORLD IS WATCHING — AND LISTENING

Eugene Symphony's search for its next music director plays to a national and international audience

DINA GILBERT CONDUCTING THE ORCHESTRA ON DEC. 3, 2016

PHOTO BY AMANDA L. SMITH

Choosing a new Eugene Symphony music director is big news here, of course, but it's also national news. That's because our little symphony, in a middling-sized town far from cultural centers, has launched the careers of three important American conductors: Marin Alsop (the first woman to lead a major American orchestra, in Baltimore), Miguel Harth-Bedoya (who now leads the Fort Worth Symphony and his own Latin American classical music ensemble and guest conducts other major orchestras) and Giancarlo Guerrero (winning an international reputation for showcasing new music with his Nashville Symphony).

It's too early to tell where Guerrero's successor, Danail Rachev, whose seven-year term ends this spring, will go next.

The exhaustive process used to choose them all, largely created by Eugene lawyer and arts supporter Roger Saydack, has become a national model. "He literally

wrote the book" on picking a music director, says Eugene Symphony executive director Scott Freck, noting that Saydack wrote the League of American Orchestras' manual on orchestra conductor searches.

So who becomes the next artistic leader matters — not just here, but nationally.

"There's no more exciting time in the life of an orchestra than when we go through this process," Freck says. "Every time, we start from scratch. It's a time of introspection and renewal."

Every seven or so years, the search for its next director forces the orchestra to consider what kind of organization it wants to be, what music it wants to play and what role it wants to assume in its community. Here's how Eugene Symphony makes the magic happen — and what to expect from the three finalists if one of them is chosen when the process concludes this spring.

INTENSIVE PROCESS

Some orchestras choose leaders in back rooms containing a few big donors and their boards. Freck, who took over in 2012, says he's proud that Eugene's is "an open process." After some initial planning last March, he emailed 300 people — artist managers, other orchestras and music conservatories among them — to let them know that the Eugene job was opening.

Freck received 257 applications from 44 countries and 33 U.S. states.

A 12-member committee of board members, orchestra musicians and community members then began checking references and watching performance videos. They trimmed the list to 70, then to 30.

The top nine candidates visited Eugene last summer to talk to committee members, to put together a hypothetical first season and to share ideas about the concert experience. They also, for the first time, actually worked with the

Continued on p. 22

WHAT THE CANDIDATES SAY



Dina Gilbert

"My main philosophy as a music director is to develop a relationship of trust between the orchestra and the audience ... by insisting that every piece in every concert deserves the full attention of the concertgoers and also by communicating and engaging with the audience before some lesser-known pieces. As music director of the Eugene Symphony, I would like to pursue ... innovative concert programs with a special focus to attract 18- to 35-year-olds, who are mostly students at the University of Oregon or young professionals."

A native of Quebec, Dina Gilbert is former assistant conductor of the Orchestre symphonique de Montreal and founder and artistic director of Ensemble Arkea, a chamber orchestra group that presents innovative interpretations of orchestral music. She conducted the orchestra in December.



Ryan McAdams

"I became a conductor first and foremost to deepen the relationship between an orchestra and its community. We have to make sure that what we put on the stage reflects the diversity of the world we are inviting into the concert hall. If we can help people to feel that they are seen and heard outside of the concert hall, then they will feel more excited about having a collective experience inside it. The collective experience of music-making must be available to everyone, and orchestras can now go outside the concert hall to offer it directly."

Brooklyn resident Ryan McAdams, who's received acclaim for leading orchestras around the world, is the first-ever recipient of the Sir Georg Solti Emerging Conductor Award. He conducts the orchestra on Jan. 26.



Francesco Lecce-Chong

"When I am considering pieces for a program, I keep three specific questions in mind: How does the piece fit in with the audience, community and orchestra? What does the piece mean to me as an artist? And how does it relate with other pieces on the program? I think the most successful music directors are ones who develop a level of trust with their audience — a trust that the music on the program will be meaningful and memorable, even if they are unfamiliar with it."

Francesco Lecce-Chong, a native of Boulder, Colo., has worked with orchestras around the world and is Assistant Conductor of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and Music Director of the Pittsburgh Youth Symphony Orchestra. He conducts the orchestra on March 16.