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SoNA, Philharmonic Strike New Notes In 2010

By Becca Bacon Martin

Neither the Symphony of Northwest Arkansas nor the Arkansas Philharmonic is the oldest musical game in town. The Fort Smith Symphony is in its 87th season and its 15th with music director and conductor John Jeter.

Jeter credits “an emphasis on quality and accessibility for everyone,” “a tremendous unified sense of purpose between symphony staff, musicians, board of directors and the community” and “terrific” financial support for the orchestra’s success. But, he adds, “at the end of the day, the success comes from the audience and community responding so positively to what is happening ON stage.”

The Symphony of Northwest Arkansas isn’t the newest game in town, either. Before the fledgling orchestra even plays its first concert on March 17, it’s already got 56 years of history behind it.

SoNA is growing from the roots of the North Arkansas Symphony Orchestra, which ceased performances in the spring of 2008, unable to fund the final concert of that season.

Since then, says Karen Kapella, executive director of SoNA, the organization has not only chosen a new name, it has paid its bills, created a three-year strategic plan, forged an alliance with the Walton Arts Center, raised 20 percent of its first-season budget for “contributed income” and hired rising star Paul Haas as its conductor and music director.

“I couldn’t be more proud of where we are today,” Kapella says. “We are excited about our vision of the future.”

In that vision, SoNA is the professional orchestra for the Northwest Arkansas metropolitan area. That, says Kapella, is what surveys said audiences want. “A fully professional, regional orchestra that represents the highest artistic quality” is how she describes it.

To that end, Haas conducted “blind” auditions, choosing among musicians from a seven-state area based on their skill alone. About half of those selected are from Northwest Arkansas, Kapella says. “Paul was blown away by the talent he witnessed.”

Haas, she says, wants to “build a happy orchestra. And he wants to build a quality orchestra.”

As far as patrons are concerned, Kapella knows the orchestra must “win back the trust” of audiences disappointed by its predecessor.

“I just want them to come to our March 17 concert, when we unveil SoNA, and they can hear our musicians and get to know Paul,” she says.

“This organization was broken, and we fixed it. It was worth saving.”

SoNA, she says, will be “the dynamic, awesome symphony Northwest Arkansas deserves.” But, she adds, “there’s room for a professional orchestra and a civic orchestra” like the Bentonville-based Arkansas Philharmonic.

Born as the Civic Symphony of Benton County, the revamped Arkansas Philharmonic Orchestra welcomed music director and conductor Steven Byess to the podium April 10. Byess says “the mission of

the APO is vastly different from that of SoNA, and the geographical location of the two orchestras allows success in two very different locations.”

“The APO is committed to being a comprehensive orchestra that serves the community through wide and diverse programming, with an equal focus on symphonic performances and educational programs, and especially through its commitment to using local musicians as members of the orchestra,” Byess says. “The APO will also establish an outreach program that takes the orchestra to several ‘satellite’ communities that cannot afford the operation of an orchestra.

“I don’t believe that we can become a genuine part of the fabric of any community unless we’re collaborating with the university, some of the churches, the schools in the area, other community ensembles,” Byess says. “That must be primary in the mission of an organization.”

The next Arkansas Philharmonic concert is Feb. 12.

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