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Orchestra sticks to mission

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The Sacramento Philharmonic's slimmed-down 2009-10 season reflects the cautious approach to budgetary concerns that have hit it and orchestras nationwide.

The new season will feature four mainstage concerts instead of the five concerts the orchestra has performed each year since its inception 13 years ago.

Next season's offerings include the appearance of violinist Rachel Barton Pine and pianist Misha Dichter with the orchestra as well as the return of Egyptian conductor Nader Abbassi.

The scuttling of a fifth concert is a temporary action, said Marc Feldman, executive director of the Philharmonic.

"With the economy the way it is, everyone out there is saying, 'Let's prepare in case things don't get better'," Feldman said.

"It's painful for everyone, and offering one less concert is not something we enjoy doing, but it's something we thought was necessary."

Eliminating the fifth concert translates to roughly \$100,000 that the orchestra's board was not willing to absorb next year, given the tough economic times, Feldman said.

Much of the economic pressure on the orchestra comes from a sharp drop in its endowment, an affliction that affects all orchestra endowments, large and small.

The Sacramento Philharmonic has seen the value of its endowment fund drop by 30 percent.

"Our decision to shrink the season was based on the assumption of less contributions coming in," said Feldman. "There are foundations, including our own, that will not be able to give us what they have, and that does add up to a lot of money."

So far, corporate contributions to the orchestra have also declined by as much as 15 percent, but Feldman said donations from private individuals are holding steady.

"We don't want to do this kind of cutting back for too long," said Sacramento Philharmonic conductor Michael Morgan. "We will have to be careful not to be overcautious."

Indeed, the orchestra has avoided being overly cautious next year with its programming. The season opens Oct. 17 with the orchestra wrapping up its focus on the music of Beethoven with a performance of the Symphony No. 9. That performance will see soprano Elizabeth Koontz, tenor Sam Read Levine and bass Kevin Short performing. The full program for that evening has not been announced, but Morgan said that it is likely that a work by a California composer – possibly even a film composer.

"We want to solidify our relationship with the California Compositions Project," said Morgan about the commissioning project that brings works by California composers about the California experience to the stage. "That way we don't lapse into doing only the standard repertoire. That would not be interesting to people."

This season, the orchestra performed a co-commissioned work by Dave and Chris Brubeck. The 2009-10 does not offer commissioned works of that scope.

The orchestra will revisit its cross-cultural exploration with the Middle East when Egyptian conductor Nader Abbassi returns to the Philharmonic in January. Abbassi, who conducted the orchestra in the 2007-08 season, will appear in a program that includes his composition "Nile Bride." Pianist Shai Wosner, a protégé of conductor Daniel Barenboim, will perform Mozart's Concerto for Piano No. 20 on that program, which also includes Rimsky-Korsakov's "Scheherazade" and a piece by an Israeli composer yet to be announced.

The technically brilliant pianist Misha Dichter will perform Rachmaninoff's "Variations on a Theme of Paganini" in a February concert next year that will also see the orchestra perform Sibelius' Symphony No. 2.

"Misha and I worked together a while ago at the Hollywood Bowl," said Morgan. "He's a fixture on the American concert stage who plays a wide breadth of repertoire, and it's nice to have someone of that caliber come to Sacramento."

The last concert of the season, scheduled for May 2010, offers violinist Rachel Barton Pine performing Prokofiev's Violin Concerto No. 2 and a work by the 20th century African American composer William Grant Still, a suite for violin and orchestra.

The appearance of Barton Pine, an incandescent violinist and one-time prodigy who rebuilt her career as a soloist after a horrible train accident, comes by way of Morgan's conducting at a Civic Orchestra of Chicago concert. Morgan said Barton Pine made a lasting impression on him during the 1983 concert when she was a 12-year-old violinist in the orchestra's string section. That concert, like the orchestra's May 2010 concert, was devoted largely to African American composers, said Morgan.

"She will be a great gift to the community when she's here," said Morgan. "She does a lot of music by black composers, and when I asked her what piece she wanted to do with us, her suggestion was the Still piece."

Although the orchestra had to cut back its season, it still intends to keep up its focus on outreach programs, said Feldman. But even that is being scaled back by 15 percent. To meet its outreach goals, the orchestra will shrink the size of some of outreach ensembles and will decrease lesson offerings.

But it has been increasing other forms of outreach, including a new partnership with the Sutter Medical Center Foundation in which the Philharmonic's professional musicians will

perform special concerts for patients, families and staff at Sutter Medical Center.

"We want to preserve who we are in this community," Feldman said. "So we've kept our outreach and community engagements, because that is our mission."

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