

CAROLINA LIVING

INSIDE CHARLOTTE ARTS

With new maestro, Charlotte Symphony lines up diverse series

BY LIZ ROTHBAUS BERTRAND
Arts Correspondent

It's a big season ahead for the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra, as it welcomes its new Music Director Kwamé Ryan.

The organization's 12th music director and the first person of color in that role, Ryan takes the helm following a year of tremendous growth and innovation for the symphony.

That includes a financially bolstered orchestra, which more than tripled its endowment in 2024, new programs like the CSO Roadshow — a mobile stage that allows the symphony

to perform in neighborhoods all over Charlotte, and new forays into immersive and electronic music.

This season will reflect the forward-thinking mentality of the symphony and Ryan, as it continues to prioritize diversity both in the form of musicians and its repertoire, including new music by living composers.

The symphony's annual gala and concert on Oct. 9 captures all of these aspirations in one evening.

Under the baton of Conductor Laureate Christopher Warren-Green, the Charlotte Symphony will be joined by Sphinx Virtuosi, the chamber



SCOTT JACKSON

Sphinx Virtuosi, a classical ensemble composed of Black and Latino musicians, will headline the Charlotte Symphony's annual gala Oct. 9.

orchestra of the Sphinx Organization, a national non-profit organization based in Detroit. The group is dedicated to social justice by expanding representation and celebrating excellence in classical music.

Ryan said he is particularly pleased to open his first season as music director with the collaboration.

"The CSO feels very passion-

SEE RYAN, 7C

RYAN

ately about things that the Sphinx Organization also feel passionately about which is ... literally changing the face of classical music through diversity and inclusion, equity," he said. "Not just talking about it but also making it visible, making it audible through... the musicians who are on stage and also the music that's being played."

ABOUT THE SPHINX ORGANIZATION

The Sphinx Organization began in 1997 with the Sphinx Competition, a national competition for string players.

The Sphinx Organization now runs a variety of programs including mentoring and training, audition support and funding opportunities to off-set the financial burdens and systemic obstacles that could prevent Latino and Black musicians from pursuing careers as professional classical musicians.

The Charlotte Symphony is one of more than 120 orchestra partners that support the National Alliance for Audition Support, a collaboration that includes Sphinx, the League of American Orchestras and the New World Symphony.

The program includes the Sphinx Orchestral Partners Auditions, which help participants prepare and connect with orchestras around the country through recorded auditions and centralized in-person auditions as first steps toward vacancies or substitute lists.

Sphinx Virtuosi members are alumni from the competition and other

Sphinx programs. The self-conducted 18-member ensemble of young professional Black and Latino artists are among the country's finest musicians.

"All of our musicians have relationships with big classical institutions. But what makes us really unique is that our musicians come from varied backgrounds, where people are also playing with touring artists like Beyoncé, Post Malone, (and) Madonna," said Bill Neri, a violist with the group and director of ensemble advancement.

The Sphinx Virtuosi performs a varied repertoire but Neri said it often commissions and premieres new works.

The group's performance in Charlotte kicks off its own national tour to more than 15 cities, including New York's Carnegie Hall and Washington D.C.'s Kennedy Center.

Their performance will feature two new works, the world premiere of "Daydreaming (A Fantasy on Scott Joplin)" by Levi Taylor and "Drill" by Curtis Stewart. Ryan said Taylor is among the African-American composers he's eager for the Charlotte Symphony to work with in coming seasons.

The Sphinx Virtuosi will also collaborate on several pieces with the Charlotte Symphony. That includes Astor Piazzolla's "Four Seasons of Buenos Aires (Summer)," a piece Neri said pays homage to Vivaldi's "Four Seasons."

The piece will feature violinist Adé Williams, who has won numerous



Genesis Photography

One of the perks of being the music director, Charlotte Symphony maestro Kwamé Ryan said, "is that you do get to empty your bucket list over time" in choosing what programs to perform.

music competitions across the U.S. and Europe.

The CSO will perform Overture from "Treemonisha," an opera by Scott Joplin, which posthumously received the Pulitzer Prize, in a new arrangement by Jannina Norpoth and Jessie Montgomery. Leonard Bernstein's Overture to "Candide" will also be on the program.

Plans are underway for Sphinx Virtuosi musicians to visit as many as six Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools for small ensemble concerts and Q & A sessions with kids. The group will also lead a masterclass for students in the Charlotte Symphony Youth Orchestras program.

Neri said community outreach events like these help kids "see that some-

thing that they're trying to do is really, truly within reach."

"I had an amazing experience where... from a very young age, the excellence in classical music and seeing Black and Latino musicians in front of me, were intertwined. They were never separate things," said Neri, who first participated in a

Sphinx Performance Academy as a middle school student in Massachusetts.

For Ryan, too, who grew up in Trinidad and dreamed of becoming a classical musician, the work of Sphinx Virtuosi also resonates deeply.

As a child, Ryan's classical concert-going was limited to one National Opera Society performance annually, since Trinidad and Tobago didn't

have a permanent orchestra in the 1980s.

"That's just not nearly enough exposure for someone who wants to eventually be leading symphonic musicians. The exposure just has to be far earlier and far more intense."

Ryan left home at age 14 1/2 to attend a boarding school in England and

pursue his musical education. He credits his mother with the courage and conviction to send her only son far from home so he could pursue his dream.

She never doubted his capacity to become a conductor and he said that her outlook, what he calls a "beneficial naivete," was life-changing for him.

"I just think that anything that I can do, or the CSO can do, to make

those kinds of channels available to up and coming conductors, composers and performers who come from similar backgrounds, with similar challenges to those that I faced... is more than worth our investment of our time and effort."

THE MAESTRO AND BRAHMS

Several pieces that Ryan will conduct this season also hold personal significance.

"One of the particular perks of being music director is that you do get to empty your bucket list over time," he said. "So there are many, many pieces that just haven't found the right opportunity to be presented ... as a

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RYAN

guest conductor that I would be delighted to present to the CSO in that first season.”

In his first concert as music director on Nov. 22 and 23, Ryan will conduct the symphony and the Charlotte Master Chorale performing Johannes Brahms’ “Ein deutsches Requiem” (A German Requiem).

Brahms was a composer that marked Ryan’s early life, as a young piano student in Trinidad. His British educated piano teacher urged him to play Brahms to catch up in his classical music studies before he moved to England.

“Brahms became sort of the soundtrack to... my yearning desire to embark on my path toward being a professional musician,” Ryan said.

“The first piece that I sang in the school chorus at my boarding school in Great Britain was the Brahms Requiem. So the soundtrack, my desire to get started as it were, as a young aspiring professional musician went from the piano to a full symphony orchestra and chorus, and it kind of blew my mind. It really did.

“And so getting to do this with the CSO as my first concert as music director would be a very special experience. The other thing that I can say about the program that’s very personal to me is the combination with Pēteris Vasks’ ‘Musica Dolorosa.’”

He said it demonstrates his belief in creating space in a modern concert orchestra’s repertoire for “living music of living composers.” It’s also one of only a handful of pieces that he will conduct that brought him to tears upon first listen.

Ryan said the piece consists of “pain without relief.”

“Musica Dolorosa,” according to BBC Music Magazine website Classical-Music.com, was written after the death of Vasks’ sister and as “a lament for the Latvian people, pre-independence.”

Ryan said by pairing it with the Brahms, which he describes as a humanist requiem in German, rather than as a Latin liturgy, will take the audience and orchestra on a journey, “where every movement is a transition, as I see it, from pain and angst to comfort.”

In March, Ryan returns to conduct Ottorino Respighi’s “Roman Festivals.” Concertgoers may be more familiar with Respighi’s “Pines of Rome,” Ryan said, but he prefers this work.

“It’s arguably even more epic, even more widescreen than ‘Pines of Rome,’ ” he said, spanning the “gruesome games” of people “being thrown to the lions and gladiators and all of that and ending with... the May festival.”

That program also includes Rachmaninoff’s



Genesis Photography

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Piano Concerto No. 2, which Ryan recalled playing in England when he was still a pianist.

The evening is rounded out with the U.S. Premiere of Adam Walters’ “The Downfall of Gaius Verres.” Walters, whose music combines Caribbean and western music traditions, is on the faculty of the University of Trinidad and Tobago. He and Ryan became friends when Ryan served as the university’s director of the Academy for the Performing Arts.

ADDITIONAL CSO SEASON HIGHLIGHTS

Ryan said other season

highlights include concertmaster Calin Ovidiu Lupanu playing a “relatively unknown” Mendelssohn Double Concerto for violin and piano along with guest pianist Phillip Bush Jan. 31 and Feb. 1. “Mendelssohn is a composer that I’m extremely fond of,” Ryan said.

He also mentioned “Beethoven x Beyoncé,” Nov. 15 and 16, as a pairing of works which he is excited to present. It captures his interest in combining music that will challenge ideas of what a concert orchestra could and should play together in a program.

Ryan said it’s something

that he intends to explore more in his first full season as music director, beginning in 2025.

He said he already feels “excellent chemistry” with the orchestra and enjoys being in Charlotte. Ryan, who is based in Germany and has spent much of his career traveling around the world, said he is also delighted that he’ll get to spend some time with family that he has in Charlotte and Raleigh.

He called it a “beautiful luxury.”

“I missed out on a lot of that family time. So getting to reconnect in that way in the city in which I work, is just something

that for me is off the chart exciting.”

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