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StagePass

September / October 2012

**UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL
WITH MAESTRO NEUMANN
OF THE FOLSOM SYMPHONY**



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QUESTIONS

with CONDUCTOR

MICHAEL NEUMANN



by Richard Wilson

AS THE ORCHESTRA FINISHES ITS FINAL NOTE, the audience comes to its feet with thunderous applause. The conductor turns, and with a smile on his face, takes a bow.

He is Maestro Michael Neumann, the driving force behind the artistic success of the Folsom Symphony since its inception in 2004.

In music circles, the Symphony has earned a reputation for excellence. In the community, it has become one of the “hot tickets” in the region with most performances being completely sold out.

I sat down with man behind the baton and talked about two of his favorite subjects: music and the Folsom Symphony.

Q. ONE OF THE CHALLENGES YOU FACE AS THE MUSICAL DIRECTOR IS SETTING THE TONE AND FEEL FOR THE ORCHESTRA. WHAT IS YOUR VISION FOR THE FOLSOM SYMPHONY?

To be honest with you, it is to continue what we’re doing. Why attempt to fix or change something if it seems to be working very well?

What I mean by that is continuing to perform the type of works that I feel people will enjoy and come to, and to program the type of works that the orchestra will enjoy playing.

I have a saying, “energy never lies.” The members of the orchestra – the members of the audience – we’re all part of a big team, and we play off of each other.

If I program music that 20 people showed up and say, “You know; I’m not sure if I’ll come again,” that would be the demise of the symphony.

We exist to play concerts for people and hope that they really enjoy it. We just want to continue with high-quality performances, with music that I believe the audience will love.

We have wonderful musicians – many of them very, very high quality, excellent musicians who have

country – along with the world right now – is seeing a lot of strife, a lot of turmoil. Whether it’s a drought taking place in three quarters of the country, or terrorism, or war, or people battling each other, there is a need for the joy that music can bring. It’s a respite from the daily grind of life.

“I think part of THE ROLE FOR THE CONDUCTOR and the orchestra is to be respected for being very authentic and loving what we do.”

chosen to go into other fields for one reason or another. This is a great opportunity for them to play major symphonic works and play for a full house.

And then the energy is there, and it’s the proverbial win/win.

Q. WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE ROLE OF MUSIC IN THE COMMUNITY? WHAT DOES IT BRING TO THE LOCAL ENVIRONMENT?

This is a discussion that has been going on for a thousand years or longer. I think in times of joy music has had its place with celebration. It’s an addition to people’s lives.

And the same is true in times of great turmoil. And I think our

No matter what the circumstances are in anyone’s life, there are people who appreciate music because it brings them something very special, even if it’s just for a couple of hours.

Q. THE ROLE OF THE CONDUCTOR IS AN INTERESTING ONE. THE CONDUCTOR MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE; YET HE OR SHE DOESN’T ACTUALLY PLAY A SINGLE NOTE. TELL ME A LITTLE BIT ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE SYMPHONY AND THE CONDUCTOR. HOW DOES THAT MAGIC HAPPEN?

The role of the conductor is multifaceted. But in relation to the orchestra, itself, it’s like having a

very fine coach coaching a team. A lot of it is inspiration by providing a role model people can look up to. And I don't mean like idolize or anything of that nature, but respect.

Back in the 1930s and '40s things were very different. Orchestras played out of fear. "If I don't play the right note, if I don't play the right bowing, if I don't play the right fingering, if I don't play the right intonation, then my goodness, I'm going to get fired. I'd better do it!" Well, that's coming out of fear.

My vision is leading in a way which is the opposite of fear, leading out of love.

I love what I do. I want to share this. We can do it together; we can

make music together and feel great about it. I want to impart that feeling to the audience, and they will love it. And here is where we have this win/win.

And so I think part of the role for the conductor and the orchestra is to be respected for being very authentic and loving what we do.

People can sense very quickly whether that's true or not.

Usually, when somebody gets up on a podium, an orchestra will know within five minutes whether that person knows what they're doing or not. They know whether they love what they're doing or not. And that will have an effect on the entire organization.

Q. AS YOU LOOK BACK OVER THE YEARS, WAS THERE A FAVORITE MOMENT YOU HAD IN A PERFORMANCE? IS THERE SOMETHING THAT STANDS OUT?

What stands out actually is the Beethoven 9th concert that we did recently. For me, that was a very spiritual experience because it is a monumental piece on many different levels. The amazing feeling that it produced was quite overwhelming.

And I'm not the only one who thinks of Beethoven's 9th as a pinnacle piece of music. But in my estimation, it is a pinnacle – nothing was ever the same after – I mean Beethoven is Beethoven.

Below: The Folsom Symphony serves greater Sacramento, Placer and El Dorado counties and is the premier orchestra of the Folsom Lake Region.



Each of the nine symphonies is totally different one from the other. But the 9th Symphony using the chorus, using soloists and the magnitude of the composition is special. Compositionally, technically, theoretically, musically, and also spiritually, it was a very big high point for many of us.

Q. I UNDERSTAND THAT YOU ALSO ARE THE CONDUCTOR OF THE SACRAMENTO YOUTH SYMPHONY.

Yes. I've been the conductor and artistic director of the Sacramento Youth Symphony for nearly 34 years.

Q. HOW IS IT DIFFERENT CONDUCTING YOUNG PEOPLE AS OPPOSED TO ADULT MUSICIANS?

There is a difference. Adults have already reached a certain level of playing and you don't need to teach them. With young people, a lot of what you do is teaching. And many of them – because they are young – have much more open minds because they haven't yet developed an opinion on a certain thing.

With young people – whether they know anything about music or not – they know very quickly whether somebody knows what they're doing. So if they say, "Well, Maestro, what do I do about this," and you go, "Yeah, geez, I really don't know. I'll look into that." Well, too much of that means maybe you're not the right person for the job.

And that's true with any field, not just music.

I think there's a certain relationship with the conductor and the audience as well. Do people like what they see and hear, or do they

not? And if they don't, word gets around.

In our case, so far, I have received numerous positive comments from audience members, some of whom are strangers. The comments come through letters, or in emails to the Board. They feel that what I am doing is extremely authentic and very heartfelt. There seems to be a lot of very positive feedback.

– just being introduced to music by my folks.

My second violin teacher in South Africa was Maria Neuss; that was her stage name. Her great-great grandfather was Dvořák. Of course, at 8 years old, that means nothing.

It's like being a kindergartener and somebody says, "Who's your teacher?" "Let's see, his name is Albert Einstein. Yeah, I think that's

“That’s what a conductor is there for . . . holding things together, **INSPIRING, and **LETTING EACH MUSICIAN PLAY TO THE BEST OF THEIR ABILITY.**”**

And again, when things are positive, then that's good feedback; don't change anything. If the feedback is negative, that's also good news because it's clear that you need to change something.

Q. HOW DID YOU DISCOVER MUSIC? YOUR MUSICAL LINEAGE, I BELIEVE, GOES ALL THE WAY BACK TO DVOŘÁK.

I was actually born in South Africa. My parents fled Germany during the Hitler years, and they met and married. They took me to some concerts when I was young. At probably about six years old I just said, "I want to play the violin," like a lot of kids do. They got me some lessons, and that's how I started out

his name." "Oh, is he any good?" "Oh, yeah, he's fine."

What do you know when you're that age? You don't know what you have until you're older and can understand it and then appreciate it.

I did an online search for her not long ago. I was trying to find some information about her, and I actually found a recording she had done with William Mengelberg who was the great conductor of Amsterdam's Concertgebouw Orchestra. The recording was done around 1943 of her performing a Dvořák violin concerto.

I immediately bought it, and have a CD. She sounds wonderful. It's one of the great orchestras with a great conductor. She was the

soloist, and little did I know that she did this sort of thing. But she was a masterful concert violinist.

Q. WHAT DO YOU ENJOY OUTSIDE OF MUSIC?

I enjoy getting together and taking part in discussions with people about world philosophy. I love animals and I've done quite a substantial amount of camping, backpacking, and that sort of thing. Although to be honest as I'm getting a little bit older, sleeping on the ground is less appealing to me than it used to be.

Some years ago I got a blue belt in karate. But it's been a while since I've done that.

I spend much of my time studying music scores which is great fun for me. It's not that this is a chore, but it's part of my duties. I love doing it. So I do spend a lot of time listening to music with some sort of critical ear, wondering, "Would this be a good piece to play?"

I enjoy a little bit of travel when I have time and money. I am married to a wonderful lady who is very, very supportive. We've been together for 10 years now.

Two years ago, we went to the Cook Islands in the middle of the South Pacific and spent 10 days on a little tropical island in the middle of nowhere. It was wonderful. The only thing we had to worry about was whether or not a coconut was going to hit us on the head.

There was really quite a bit of down time and serene time and ability to read books and other materials. In this particular case, I did bring a couple of scores with

me, and I took time sitting with them on the beach.

It was very vivid, sitting on a chair on the beach overlooking the ocean with a pair of headphones on listening to the Beethoven 9th Symphony with a score in my lap.

Q. IN MANY WAYS THE CONDUCTOR HAS THE BEST SEAT IN THE HOUSE. YOU'RE RIGHT IN FRONT OF THE ORCHESTRA, AND YOU CAN FEEL THE ENERGY AND SOUND THAT COMES FROM THEM.

That's true. It's also a great deal of responsibility. It's not "sit back and listen." It is very proactive. It's not directing, but leading them.

A lot of times people will ask me the question, "What does the conductor really do?" And for somebody who doesn't know much about it, it's a great question because what they see is somebody up there waving their arms around. Nobody in the orchestra is really looking at them anyway, right?

That's partly true and partly not true. Out of the peripheral vision, the

orchestra is absolutely paying attention to the director, especially during critical moments. So it's very proactive—you need to always be leading.

That's why in so many orchestras—especially in Europe—the conductor is what looks like quite a bit ahead of the beat, but the orchestra is playing behind the beat. There are reasons for that, but you've got to be on top of the music and always inspiring and leading.

That's what a conductor is there for—holding things together, keeping things together, inspiring, and letting each musician play to the best of their ability.

Q. WHAT DO YOU ENJOY MOST IN WORKING WITH THE SYMPHONY?

The only thing I really would say—and this is very, very true and very heartfelt—is the joy that I have of working with the folks on the Board and the musicians. It is a really joyful experience working with people who are very supportive, very nurturing. I really believe it's a team effort. Everybody involved—even the audience—are members of this team.

The Folsom Symphony in rehearsal.





Above: Maestro Michael Neumann has been the music director and conductor for the Folsom Symphony since its first performance in 2004.

Working with a team that works well together for the common good is a joyful experience because there are many symphonies that don't work that way. There's derision and divisiveness going on within the board of directors. There's divisiveness going on between orchestra members. And this is true in humanity. This is just a microcosm of the big picture, but it's true.

And so when I get to work with people who appreciate me, when I get to work with people who love what they do and are totally into it for the good of the entity, that's a wonderful situation. I feel that this is

true for the Board and for the players of the Symphony. It feels like a very copacetic team, so it brings me a lot of happiness.

Q • WHAT DRIVES YOU AS A CONDUCTOR?

What drives me? It's probably best illustrated by the Beethoven 9th Symphony performance we did back in March.

There was a very talented string bass player in the Sacramento Youth Symphony. He performed with us in Salzburg, Vienna and Prague during our summer tour a few years ago. He had a real passion for music.

Tragically, he contracted cancer of the brain and had to drop out of school and the Youth Symphony which he so dearly loved. He ended up in a wheelchair, and things were getting worse and worse.

I got word that the one thing that this young man wanted before he died – his wish – was to hear Beethoven's 9th played live.

Two weeks later, the Folsom Symphony played Beethoven's 9th Symphony. His parents brought him to the concert in his wheelchair. It was a magical performance of an amazing piece of music.

Several days later, he died. But

his dying wish was fulfilled. All of us knew that we had done much more than simply play music that day. I can't tell you how grateful his parents were.

Making a difference in people's lives is the big picture for me. It's the bottom, bottom line outside of even music and is my goal and purpose. I want to leave this world a better place than I found it.

I do it through music, through the Youth Symphony, and through the Folsom Symphony. When I am able to bring joy into people's lives and sometimes have some part in a magical moment, then I feel a sense of satisfaction that I'm doing what I truly need to be doing in this world. 🎻

You can next hear the Folsom Symphony perform on Saturday, October 20, 2012 at 7:30 p.m. Tickets are available at www.threestages.net

For more information about the Folsom Symphony please visit www.folsomsymphony.com

THE FOLSOM SYMPHONY

MICHAEL NEUMANN, MUSIC DIRECTOR & CONDUCTOR

Join us for our 9th Season!

2012-2013 SEASON



A Heart's Jewel and Triumph Oct 20, 2012

Our season opener will feature Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto performed by Rebecca Corruccini, an alumna of the Sacramento Youth Symphony and current member of the Minnesota Orchestra. The evening includes Schubert's "Unfinished" Symphony No. 8, Dvorak's "Carnival Overture", and Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture."



Of Joy & Fate Dec 15, 2012 Dec 16, 2012

Our annual holiday concert will leave you in the mood to celebrate. The pieces range from joyous (Beethoven's "Fidelio Overture," Rimsky-Korsakov's "Capriccio Espagnol") to contemplative (Brahms' "Schicksalslied" and Handel's inspiring "Hallelujah Chorus"). The performance concludes with a lively sing-along.



Love Is All You Need Feb 9, 2013

Enjoy some of the most passionate classical music ever written by the great romantics of Europe, including Beethoven's Symphony No. 6, Richard Strauss' "Vienna Philharmonic Fanfare" and Ravel's "Bolero." Tenor Jaeho Lee will sing two of the most beautiful arias ever written for the male voice.



Our Magnificent Horns Mar 23, 2013

The Folsom Symphony's outstanding horn section will be featured in Schumann's energetic "Konzertstück". Brahms' poignant and emotional Symphony No. 3 and Vaughan Williams' lush string serenade "Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis" will also be performed.



Made In America May 18, 2013

Celebrate the ingenuity of American music with John Williams' "E.T.," "Saving Private Ryan" and "Schindler's List" plus Copland's "Rodeo" and selections from Broadway's "Wicked" and "Chicago." Violinist Dawn Harms will perform Barber's Violin Concerto (1st movement) and other repertoire.



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