

**NAME IN THE NEWS**

## **Jonathan Parrish**

The director of the Hawaii Symphony Orchestra is thinking creatively with an eye on the bottom line

By Vicki Viotti

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Jonathan Parrish

Jonathan Parrish had a moment to reflect this week, right after the close of the Hawaii Symphony Orchestra's 2013-2014 concert series and the soon-to-be announced full season for the next year, starting Sept. 13.

Fresh on his mind was the acknowledgements given at the closing concert to the orchestra's musicians, who have invested many years in this organization and its predecessor, the Honolulu Symphony.

"We asked musicians to stand who had been in the orchestra for five to 10 years, 10 to 20, 30 to 40 years," said the symphony's executive director. "The audience was starting to gasp. ... We had musicians stand up who had been in the orchestra for more than 40 years. Three musicians."

He paused: "There's our institutional history," he said. "We're a startup organization with a 100-year legacy."

Parrish, formerly performing in the orchestra as principal in the French horn section, was hired for his spot last November. He succeeded Steven Monder, who oversaw the renaissance of the island symphony as its volunteer president.

Now Parrish heads a small but permanent staff who occupy a modest office on Waialae Avenue, the former site of a shoe store in a building owned by one of the supportive families also represented on the symphony board. Such connections help in any business, but are especially critical in surmounting the fiscal challenges of a performing arts company.

He and his wife -- Minou Lallemand, artistic director of Onium Ballet Project -- both have East Coast origins and had wondered whether this community could continue to sustain them. But the new post has made them feel more rooted than ever in Honolulu.

The symphony is on the verge of starting what Parrish hopes will be its fullest concert series, with pops and classical offerings as well as various educational and community concerts. HSO piloted the latter idea over the weekend, with a free concert for 1,200 lounging on the lawn around the Kailua Beach Park pavilion.

Neighbor island trips are in the plans, as well as explorations of new "product lines" -- concerts in Waikiki and at conventions as well. He counts himself as a realist, but one who can dream big.

"Our board chose to call this organization the Hawaii Symphony Orchestra, and we really intend to live up to that name," he said. "I would like the orchestra to be so important that visitors hear about it on the cab ride from the airport."

**QUESTION:** How did you come to take this position? Is it unusual for a member of the orchestra to have the top management job?

**ANSWER:** I would say a number of executive directors of orchestras are former musicians, in that they studied music at some time. But to be a professional musician in an orchestra and then become the executive director of that orchestra is pretty unusual -- until the last couple of years, when there have been three or four situations.

In looking for good leadership options, sometimes a musician's name comes up these days. This is no real clear path or career trajectory to the job. You do need to understand what an orchestra is and how it operates. Understanding the repertoire is important. So there are a number of music-specific skill sets and information that's helpful to have.

And a number of musicians find themselves in entrepreneurial activities, in addition to their music. For example, for me, I found myself 10 years ago running Chamber Music Hawaii....

**Q:** Was that your first managerial experience?

**A:** Well, I would say my first really formal managerial experience, because I got involved in other things. I helped start a group in Washington, D.C.,

20-something years ago; I've had chamber groups of my own, I've served on the board of the symphony as a musician representative. ...

You start to pick up a little skill and information. At Chamber Music Hawaii, I was the only manager, really, so I did everything: I did the operations, I did the marketing, I did the development, a little bit of everything. So it gives me kind of a nice overview of how a performing arts organization operates. ...

**Q:** Did you hesitate before taking the job?

**A:** I had to think about it, sure. ... I understood that would mean I would not be a performing musician in the orchestra anymore. That would be a tough decision after 15 years of playing, after 30 years of being a professional musician. ...

I knew that being a musician in the orchestra, and the spokesperson for the musicians for the last few years, that there would be a challenge in changing roles so dramatically.

But, ultimately, I felt that I had invested so much time and energy in this orchestra and in the community that here I was being offered an opportunity to have more impact, more influence on the situation in a positive way, that I couldn't turn that opportunity down, couldn't turn my back on that opportunity.

**Q:** How hard was it to assume the role in which you have to make decisions that aren't necessarily in the musicians' interest?

**A:** Well, I think most everything that I contemplate that is in the interest of the organization I think is in the interest of the musicians. No surprise, this was a question that came up in my interviews by the board and the search committee.

I would just say that clearly the board wants this organization to be successful, and so do the musicians. Our interests are much more in line than you would expect.

It wasn't so much of a transition, really. My responsibility is now to the organization, as opposed to representing the musicians. But my thoughts about what should happen, how it should happen, are pretty much the same. ...

**Q:** Do you think there has been a culture shift at all, since the rancorous Honolulu Symphony days, because of the dissolution and rebirth? Do you sense more collaboration now?

**A:** I think so. I think when you focus on the mission of the organization and the larger goals, then I think we're all in agreement about what we want to do and how we're going to do it. The musicians have been extraordinarily flexible and helpful in getting the orchestra this far. It's taken the efforts of many, many people. But the musicians' contribution to that should not be underestimated.

The board has been tremendously committed and had to invest their time and energy at a time when a lot of people were reluctant to. And they should be applauded for that courage and that commitment.

But I think what motivated them, and what continues to motivate us, is that we just feel that Hawaii deserves to have a professional orchestra. If we're not here, there is none. ...

It's something that's been part of the community, woven into the fabric of the community for decades. It's our job to continue that legacy. ...

**Q:** What is your budget?

**A:** The budget for this year was about \$3.2 million.

**Q:** How does that break down into ticket revenue, other sources?

**A:** Ticket revenues, generally about a third. ... That's kind of a normal breakdown for a performing arts organizations. And then about two-thirds contributed revenue.

And that contributed revenue has many components. We have support from the Honolulu Symphony Foundation, support from the State of Hawaii, grant-in-aid, which was administered through the Department of Labor and Industrial Relations Office of Community Services. ...

**Q:** How much was the state grant?

**A:** \$450,000.

**Q:** What are the prospects for another grant for next year?

**A:** We applied for another grant. This time we asked for funds to help us reach out to the neighbor islands, something we've wanted to do for a long time. It appears we will be getting some funding, this time through a grant-in-aid administered by the State Foundation on Culture and the Arts. This is what we hope will enable us to begin to build an audience on the neighbor islands. ...

**Q:** About your experimenting with outdoor concerts: Aside from the Waikiki Shell, that's not been done much before?

**A:** It's challenging, logistically, to do it. You've got very expensive instruments, you can't sit out there in the rain, you can't even get a single drop on them.

We do have an orchestra tent we can put up, if we've got enough financial support for the event. And if there's an existing venue already, like the (Kailua Beach Park) pavilion, that makes it a lot easier. ...

We hope that all of that will be part of the formula. Maybe finding a way to perform in West Oahu, North Shore, Maui Arts and Cultural Center, Kahilu Theater, we want to get back to Hilo, we want to get back to Kauai.

**Q:** How are plans shaping up for the next season?

**A:** I would say it's about 85 or 90 percent done. Unfortunately, you really can't announce anything until you're 100 percent done. But we've shared a few small details.

The first is that we're going to open the season Sept. 13 and 14, and we specifically asked for those dates with the city because that's the 50th anniversary of the formal premiere of the Blaisdell, which was not the Blaisdell then.... It was the Hawaii International Center, and they called it the "new theater concert hall."

We're going to recreate half of that program. Dorothy Kirsten was the guest artist, I don't think she's alive anymore, soloist soprano. ...

We're going to perform the Tchaikovsky and the Mendelssohn, as was done in this program.

**Q:** The "Romeo and Juliet" and the "Midsummer Night's Dream"?

**A:** Yes. This was the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth. This year is the 450th, so I think that's part of the reason they selected these things. ...The second half will be new. ...

What's significant about it is the symphony has performed in the Blaisdell Concert Hall longer and more often than any other organization over the years. ... We have great history in that building.