

The **MISSOULA** *Symphony*

Not Your Grandmother's Symphony





ARTICLE BRIANNA RANDALL | PHOTOGRAPHY JONATHAN QUALBEN

The word “symphony” tends to conjure up images of expensive tuxedos and dimly lit theaters. Ask Missoulians, though, and they’re likely to picture sitting on a grass knoll in the summer sun enjoying a free concert.

The Missoula Symphony Association, now celebrating its 60th season, has long recognized that Missoula isn’t into tuxedos and stuffy venues. That’s why the Symphony Orchestra and the Symphony Chorale play in the park, at a local bar, and below wilderness peaks in addition to the concert hall at the University of Montana.

“Our goal is to have the symphony’s vibe fit the town, to weave the music into the lives of the community,” says John Driscoll, executive director of the Missoula Symphony Association. “It’s not your grandmother’s symphony.” The Missoula Symphony is renowned for playing the best music ever written, while also making sure that music is relevant and accessible to all the residents of the Garden City.

They certainly succeeded 11 years ago when the inaugural “Symphony in the Park” celebrated the association’s 50th anniversary. It’s quickly become an iconic community event, drawing thousands of Missoulians who cram into Caras Park’s grassy hillside each August to hear beautiful music. This free concert is made possible by a half-dozen local business sponsors and a few individual donors.

“It’s my favorite day of the year,” says Driscoll with a grin.

Driscoll took the job as director of the association in 1999 at just 27 years old. A Butte native, he attended music school in Colorado and Tennessee, playing trumpet for the Knoxville Symphony before moving back to Montana with his wife. “To me, Missoula is the best of all worlds: recreation and scenery, but also a thriving cultural scene. It’s the cultural capital of the state,” says Driscoll.

Up until two years ago, Driscoll still played principal trumpet for the symphony. Now, however, the Symphony and the Chorale, both housed under the association’s umbrella, have grown to a point where his job requires all of his mental focus.

Missoulians have embraced their symphony, and in response the symphony continues to add new events. This year, the association is introducing a

CONTINUED >





three-concert cabaret series at the Top Hat. Audience members get to hear great chamber music in an intimate venue, complete with bistro-style dinner and drinks. “The musicians we choose to perform have a personality to match the venue—let’s just say it isn’t stodgy.”

The five concerts each season include a pair of performances on Friday and Saturday nights. One of these is the popular Holiday Pops, a joint concert with the Missoula Symphony Chorale’s 100-voice ensemble directed by Dean Peterson. Music director Darco Butorak, who took the baton in 2007, choreographs the symphony concerts, which feature soloists from around the world. These expert soloists provide professional inspiration for the symphony’s musicians, and titillate audience members, too.

The symphony also performs a youth concert one day each year for all fourth grade students who live within a 100-mile radius of Missoula. “Buses pull in and kids start piling out into the Dennison Theatre. It’s so much fun!” exclaims Driscoll. Part of the fun stems from the “hilarious concerts” written by Butorak and one of his friends. (Last year’s youth concert was a superhero theme.) Fourth grade is the year that students choose band or choir, and this concert is designed to introduce them to different instruments as well as the vocal range of the chorale.

The same day as the youth concerts, the symphony hosts a family concert at 7 p.m. Driscoll chokes up with emotion as he explains the scene outside the Dennison Theatre the first year the family concert was held. He was nervous no one would show up for the brand new concert. Instead, a sea of children and parents walked toward the theater, smiling and laughing. The family concert sells out every year and meets its goal of providing symphonic music to children of all ages as well as their parents and grandparents. **CONTINUED >**



Perhaps one of the most unique events put on by the Missoula Symphony Association is the Ovando Gran Fondo. This 55-mile, fully supported dirt-and-gravel bike ride winds through some of the most beautiful scenery in the West, and features a performance by a string quartet—including the one-and-only Darco Butorak on cello—during the lunch stop at Monture Creek campground.

The Gran Fondo is the association's signature fundraising event, originally designed by the board to find new funders for the ongoing costs of the symphony. The Gran Fondo certainly is special. The off-road ride's top selling points include a 15-mile stretch through private land only accessible during this event, two challenge loops for experienced riders, and a breakfast put on by the Ovando School.

"The community of Ovando has really embraced us. We couldn't do it without them," says Driscoll. In return for the students' and parents' help putting on the big event, the association makes a significant donation to the Ovando School, which is used to take students on field trips around Montana.

With only 250 spots open for riders, this year's ride sold out in a month (but the event is always open to volunteers). Riders aged 13 to 74 years old have finished the course, raising money from sponsors or friends to support the symphony. In an unexpected twist, Gran Fondo riders often become fans of symphony music, too.

And it's easy to see why: The Missoula Symphony is one-of-a-kind, committed community of musicians who are having as much fun as the diverse audience members who appreciate their high-quality music.



MUSICIAN PROFILE: SALLY DAER

If the Missoula Symphony is “not your grandmother’s symphony,” then Sally Daer is not your typical grandmother. When I called Daer, I interrupted her daily violin practice. This surprised me, as I had assumed that the Missoula Symphony’s longest running member—“but not the oldest,” Daer laughingly adds—wouldn’t need daily practice after five decades with the orchestra.

“On a stringed instrument you can get into bad habits easily,” she explains. Not only does she practice regularly, Daer also started taking violin lessons once a month after retiring from her 50-year teaching career. “Music keeps you mentally with it. It keeps me on my toes.”

Dedication seems to be Daer’s middle name, as evidenced by her many hobbies. She’s run more than 20 marathons (including Missoula, Boston and New York), plays in a string quartet outside of the symphony, keeps up with her young grandchildren, and rides the 55-mile Gran Fondo bike course each summer.

She’s also generous: Daer doesn’t take the honorarium the symphony pays its members; instead, she gives it back to the Association. “Playing in the symphony is a gift to me.”

Daer marked her first season playing violin in the Missoula Symphony in 1967, back when founding conductor Eugene Andre was directing music. Missoula wasn’t her first orchestral gig—Daer started playing in the Bozeman Symphony in the seventh grade.

“I’m so glad that my mother made me learn to play violin, even though I wanted to learn clarinet,” she reminisces. As for why she’s stayed so long with the Missoula Symphony, Daer credits the good people she works with. “It’s just so much fun!”

Daer particularly enjoys working with music director Darco Burtorak, partly because he challenges the musicians to be the best they can be. “With Darco, there can’t be any slackers. He not only raises the bar on the musical pieces, but he also inspires us to reach new levels because he demands excellence.”

She certainly seems up to the challenge and looks forward to playing violin in the Missoula Symphony for many years to come.



UPCOMING EVENTS

- August 9: Symphony in the Park, a free concert at Caras Park
- September 8: Cabaret Concert Series I: “Quartetto Gelato”
- September 19: Ovando Gran Fondo, a 55-mile bike race beneath the Bob Marshall mountains
- October 3-4: First concert of the season at Dennison Theatre: “Yearn for Freedom”

For more information about the symphony, upcoming events and volunteer opportunities, visit MissoulaSymphony.org.