

FALL ARTS PREVIEW

WHAT NOT TO MISS IN MUSIC, VISUAL ARTS, THEATER AND MORE

By Pete Humes



PHOTO COURTESY OF STEVEN BRINDLE

STEVEN BRINDLE - CONDUCTOR

CLASSICAL MUSIC

Rethinking The Symphony Conductor Steven Brindle And The Hampton Roads Philharmonic Want To Change Your Relationship With Classical Music

It's not unusual for a group of people to start a band. It happens all the time. A handful of like-minded musicians gather in a garage, crank up the amps, learn a few loud rock songs and then book some gigs at the local watering holes.

But when that "band" is a full orchestra, things get more complicated. First, you need an awfully big garage to fit more than 40 classical musicians and their instruments. You can't just learn "most" of a Dvorak symphony and fill in the rest with a wicked drum solo. And finally, you need to find places to perform. Places where you (literally) "fit in" and preferably, places with real live people who appreciate a good Hungarian march when they hear one.

It sounds like a daunting challenge. But when the Hampton Road Philharmonic called to invite Steven Brindle to become their conductor, he accepted that challenge. And the odds are pretty good that he did so with a smile on his face.

The 26-year-old Christopher Newport grad might not be the first person who comes to mind when you think of a conductor. But Brindle is part of trend in the classical music world. Big name orchestras in places like Indianapolis, Memphis and Seattle have tapped men

and women under 40 to lead them. Venezuelan sensation Gustavo Dudamel took over the Los Angeles Philharmonic at 29.

It's okay if Brindle is not what you expect, because the same could said for the Hampton Roads Philharmonic.

Founded in 2013, the HRP is a volunteer collective of classical musicians from all walks of life. The group includes a diverse mix of young and old, professional players, retired military band members, music students and passionate amateurs.

The orchestra found a rehearsal home at Fort Monroe, and a welcoming performance space at The American Theatre in Hampton. Every week, Brindle steps up to the podium to conduct an orchestra that comes together because they love to play.

"That's the interesting challenge of a community orchestra, working with people of all ages and skill levels," said Brindle. As conductor he has to consider each member, choosing music that balances capabilities and creative satisfaction. Every piece that the HRP performs has to work for the players, the audience and the man with the baton.

Once it was established, Brindle said that "musicians came out of the woodwork because many of them had no outlet for performing."

Word is still spreading. This year, the HRP has plans to grow by an additional dozen members and their successful seasons continue to attract talented musicians and soloists who are eager to perform. The Hampton Roads Philharmonic performance on Oct. 18 at The American Theatre will feature Young Steinway Artist Rebecca Willett. The 20-year-old Virginia Beach pianist has performed with the Richmond Symphony and continues to perform as a soloist and chamber musician throughout the commonwealth and around the world.

Guest spots at HRP concerts are appealing to young local artists who wouldn't ordinarily get the chance to play with a full orchestra for a receptive audience. For Brindle, finding those audiences has become a top priority. He is especially interested in filling seats with the kind of people who don't usually come out to see live classical music.

"It's a definite passion of mine to bring in younger audiences," said Brindle. "Every time we've played for them, they've loved it."

He's not just waiting around, hoping they will show up.

When it comes to changing hearts and minds, the 26-year-old conductor is a firm believer in a creative, proactive approach. Right now, Brindle lives in Richmond and commutes every week for the 2-hour rehearsals. Back in Richmond, he's had a head start rewriting the rules of classical music performance. Brindle stays there as conductor of Capital Opera Richmond and a cellist for Classical Revolution RVA. As part of both projects, he's taken arias and chamber music out of the concert halls and into local bars, galleries and cafes.

"I'm all for tearing down the stigma and rules, breaking down the barriers," he said.

Brindle wants to put classical music into people's faces. Not literally, of course, but in a way that shrinks the space between audience and performer, making the experience more personal and less ... formal. It's trickier with a growing, full-sized orchestra, and Brindle knows there won't be an overnight revolution. But the young conductor is patient ... and optimistic.

"It's a tough goal," he said. "But I'm really excited about making classical music a vital part of people's lives."

Hampton Roads Philharmonic with Rebecca Willett
Oct. 18, 2:30 p.m. | The American Theatre



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MUNICH SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
Philippe Entremont, Conductor & Piano Soloist Pepe Romero, Guitar Soloist / The Romeros, Guitar Quartet Nov. 12, 7:30 p.m. | Ferguson Center for the Arts
Talk about international flavor. Europe shows up in force when Germany's Munich Symphony Orchestra arrives in Newport News. The performance features the conducting and solo stylings of leg-

endary French pianist Philippe Entremont as well as solo and quartet performances by The Romeros. Spain's "Royal Family of the Guitar." No matter if you show up to support your favorite country or simply to enjoy the music, the evening should be just as exciting as the World Cup, but with much less kicking and clarinets instead of vuvuzelas.