

Sounds of America

Gramophone's guide to the classical scene in the US and Canada

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JoAnn Falletta: Strong
artistic leadership

Scoring the Buffalo's charge

One hundred years ago Buffalo had the largest number of millionaires per capita.

It was a powerful city and has fallen in recent years. We want to be part of its renaissance," explains JoAnn Falletta, music director of the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra. The fact that the orchestra is flourishing during this, its 75th anniversary season, is reason enough to celebrate, especially given the current economic climate. Falletta, who took up the helm in 1999, has set a strong example of artistic and financial leadership for an orchestra that has seen its fair share of strikes and fiscal woes. During her busy tenure thus far

The Buffalo Philharmonic has achieved much in 75 years but, as music director JoAnn Falletta tells **Vivien Schweitzer**, many challenges lie ahead

the orchestra has returned to recording; its Naxos disc of John Corigliano's *Mr Tambourine Man: Seven Poems of Bob Dylan* won two Grammy Awards in 2009. Several other recordings have received Grammy nominations.

Last year the orchestra embarked on its first tour in 20 years and established a solid financial footing; a five-year campaign concluding in 2008 raised more than \$32 million for the endowment. The BPO posted a balanced budget in the 2009-10 season. To celebrate the

anniversary, the orchestra has released a five-disc set of music from the BPO vaults showcasing Falletta and previous music directors including William Steinberg, Josef Krips, Lukas Foss, Michael Tilson Thomas, Julius Rudel, Semyon Bychkov and Maximiano Valdés. They conduct varied repertoire and soloists including Emanuel Ax and Glenn Gould.

Falletta, who also celebrates her 20th anniversary as music director of the Virginia Symphony this season, describes following in the

footsteps of this impressive roster as "really daunting". Steinberg, the music director from 1945 to 1952, "created a European orchestra in Buffalo", fostering, says Falletta, "a European sound with a gravity, warmth and weight to it and a golden quality to the strings". That sound, she adds, was greatly enhanced by the 2839-seat, 70-year-old Kleinhans Music Hall, which she characterises as "an amazing acoustical instrument".

Falletta says that when the BPO was conducted by Lukas Foss and Michael Tilson Thomas, it acquired "a lot of American muscle and an American way of thinking about music", while retaining a European aesthetic.



“They play with a warm sound, but also with an athleticism born out of playing new music.”

Judging by recent recordings, Falletta has continued the legacies of her predecessors and nurtured both that warmth of sound and an adventurous mindset towards contemporary music. The performances are notable for their polish and spirit.

Falletta started out as a guitar major and has an international guitar competition named after her. She received Masters and Doctoral degrees in conducting from Juilliard, where she took master classes with Bernstein, whom she calls “a shining luminary in my life”.

Falletta, who has conducted 80 world premieres, focuses on an eclectic repertoire with the BPO, spotlighting local composers and regularly collaborating with other Buffalo institutions.

Recording has also been an integral part of her tenure, with the orchestra even establishing its own label, Beau Fleuve. Its discography features several “Holiday Classics” discs and releases of such works as Rachmaninov’s *Symphony No 2*, Zemlinsky’s *The Mermaid* and popular and obscure pieces by the likes of Ravel, Satie, Debussy and Franz Schreker.

For her 14 discs with the BPO on the Naxos label, Falletta has spotlighted seldom-performed and contemporary music, including Daron Hagen’s opera *Shining Brow*, John Corigliano’s *Red Violin Concerto*, Frederick Converse’s *The Mystic Trumpeter* and the world-premiere recording of a symphony and piano trio by Marcel Tyberg.

That latter disc is the first instalment of a multi-year project, launched during the BPO’s 75th anniversary season, featuring the music of Tyberg, an Austrian pianist and composer who died in Auschwitz in 1944. Falletta sees his aesthetic as “a link between Bruckner and Mahler, not cutting-edge 20th century music” and “reflective of the people he admired most; an interesting

amalgam of those influences in a unique voice”.

The BPO performed the premiere performance of Tyberg’s sweeping *Symphony No 3*, then recorded it along with the Piano Trio in F. Tyberg’s crumbling manuscripts (which Falletta admits were difficult to decipher) had been kept for many years by Enrico Mihich, a Buffalo doctor whose father decided to safeguard the scores when it became likely that Tyberg (a family friend) would be deported from Italy because of his Jewish ancestry. Falletta will lead the BPO in the world premiere of Tyberg’s *Symphony No 2* in May.

Other significant concerts during the 75th anniversary season include the world premiere of Daron Hagen’s *Songbook* concerto for violin and orchestra in May, and the Verdi *Requiem* in June. The BPO will release a disc of works by Joseph Suk in March.

Falletta notes that the BPO’s prolific recording schedule has improved its live performances. Recording “changes the way

musicians think about their art; they are more intent about how they approach things and are able to concentrate intensely for longer periods, which affects how they play concerts,” she says.

There is one sensitive subject. A book published for the 75th anniversary, which details the history of the orchestra in the light of the social and political events of each era, makes the following observation: “JoAnn Falletta became the first woman to serve as the music director of a major symphony orchestra”. But that unofficial accolade was awarded by national media in the UK and US to another conductor, Marin Alsop, when she took up the helm of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra in 2007. Falletta supporters rallied to her cause, offended that the BPO wasn’t considered a major orchestra. “It was gratifying to me to see how much people cared about Buffalo. That the orchestra meant so much made me realise how important an orchestra is to its community,” says Falletta.

As for the issue of women conductors, Falletta has led workshops for aspiring female maestri. But, she notes, the questions they asked had nothing to do with gender, but focused instead on such standard issues as how to programme music and reach out to new audiences.

One of Falletta’s goals is to strengthen the BPO’s ties with the local community. The orchestra was founded in 1935 during the Great Depression with the aid of a Works Progress Administration grant intended to provide employment for musicians in western New York (there had been various incarnations of the orchestra in Buffalo before its official incarnation as a professional ensemble).

“The orchestra was formed to keep people alive,” Falletta says, “and I think those kind of roots are important. The orchestra has remained very connected to the people here. I think our audience in Buffalo is one of the most economically diverse I have seen. We get more government support than most orchestras. We have been recipients of a lot of state and county funding, which has enabled us to keep ticket prices low.”

Falletta, who often conducts in Europe and so has experience of other funding models, believes a healthy mix of government and private sector support is ideal. Relying on private support, she says, “means you have to respond to your community”. She notes that the BPO’s audience base has been growing, but in order to keep ticket prices low the orchestra has to find its economic base in other ways, such as through individual donations and support from foundations.

Keeping the BPO relevant to Buffalo and exploring ways that the orchestra can continue to enrich the city’s cultural life in difficult economic times is a recurring theme for Falletta. But then, she points out, the orchestra’s entire history is the story of “the struggle of 75 years – how we struggled to keep the Buffalo Philharmonic alive”. ●

FALLETTA'S BUFFALO - IN CONCERT, ON DISC

UPCOMING CONCERTS IN 2011 For tickets, visit www.bpo.org

February 19 and 20

Ligeti’s *Concert Romanesc*, Lowell Liebermann’s *Flute Concerto* and Tchaikovsky’s *Fifth Symphony*

March 4 and 5

Debussy’s *La mer*, with the soprano Laura Aikin in Strauss and Berg.

April 30 and May 1

Grieg’s *Piano Concerto* with soloist Christopher O’Riley, and Marcel Tyberg’s *Symphony No 2*

May 13, 14 and 15

Beethoven’s *Pastoral Symphony* and the world premiere of Daron Hagen’s *Songbook* concerto for violin and orchestra featuring Michael Ludwig as soloist.

June 4 and 5

Verdi’s *Requiem* with the soprano Angela Brown.

BUFFALO PO ON DISC Recommended recordings

Marcel Tyberg

Naxos 8 572236
Symphony No 3 and Piano Trio

John Corigliano

Naxos 8 559331
Mr Tambourine Man: Seven Poems of Bob Dylan with the soprano Hila Plitmann

John Corigliano

Naxos 8 559671
Violin Concerto, The Red Violin, with Michael Ludwig

Franz Schubert

Naxos 8 572051
An arrangement for orchestra of the *Death and the Maiden* String Quartet and *Symphony No 8, Unfinished*

Richard Strauss

Naxos 8 572041
Orchestral suites from *Der Rosenkavalier*, *Die Frau ohne Schatten* and *Josephs-Legende*