





Located just outside the Beltway northwest of Washington, D.C., Montgomery County's new Music Center at Strathmore is the focal point for classical music in one of the nation's most affluent suburbs.



Ron Solomon

## by Chester Lane

Michael Stern leads IRIS, the chamber orchestra operating in a suburb east of Memphis.



Trey Clark

In the southwest corner of Tennessee, just outside the I-240 “Loop” that circles Memphis, lies the city of Germantown. Located in Shelby County, where the average household income exceeds that of any other county in the state except three in the Nashville area, Germantown is a largely residential community with a population pegged officially, and with quaint precision, at 40,203. It prides itself on its AAA credit rating from Standard & Poor’s, its superior public serv-

ices, and a government that, in the words of City Administrator Patrick Lawton, “places a high value on things that add value to the lives of its citizens.” A visitor to the city’s web site will find Germantown’s amenities described in the usual language of civic boosterism, but with an eye-opening difference: This is a community that offers “award-winning schools, acres of parkland, a comprehensive fitness and recreation complex, an extensive sports program, *and IRIS, the city’s chamber orchestra*” (emphasis added).

IRIS—the name is not an acronym but a reference to the state flower, and capitalized for branding reasons—will begin its sixth season this fall as resident orchestra in the city-owned Germantown Performing Arts Centre. It is the brainchild of Albert Peralion, who was then serving in a municipal post as GPAC’s first executive director, and has been led since its inception by Michael Stern, the rising American conductor who had caught Peralion’s eye when he guest-conducted the Memphis Symphony in a benefit concert at the fledgling venue. IRIS may be unique in the annals of U.S. orchestras, both in its municipal provenance and in its mission of performing eight concerts per season as a resident orchestra using top-

flight soloists and crack freelancers drawn from a pool that is both local and national. But in another way, IRIS epitomizes a phenomenon that is of major significance to America’s cultural life: a growing decentralization of professional symphonic activity, in which high-caliber orchestras and venues outside the major cities are vying vigorously for the attentions of concertgoers who live or work nearby, as opposed to downtown.

There are many variations to the pattern. In Germantown, the diverse offerings of Stern’s resident orchestra (including commissioned premieres, and some standard works that require larger-than-chamber-sized forces) co-exist with Sunday runouts and chamber-orchestra concerts by the Memphis Symphony—which first began performing at GPAC in 1995 during construction of its new downtown hall, the Cannon Center, and in the process discovered what Executive Director Ryan Fleur calls “an audience that would come to a venue in the suburbs but would not attend downtown.” Orange County’s Pacific Symphony, founded in 1978 in freeway-rich Southern California, identifies with no specific municipality or suburb, yet bills itself as “the largest orchestra formed in the United States in the last 30 years.” Elgin,

Illinois, an outlying suburb of Chicago linked to the Windy City by I-90, supports the state's second-largest orchestra and is urgently in need of a new venue to accommodate the growing number of patrons who choose not to venture downtown, even for some of the finest symphonic fare on the planet.

But arguably the most dramatic development to date on the suburban symphonic front is the Music Center at Strathmore, a state-of-the-art performance and educational facility that opened last February on a hillside in North Bethesda, Maryland, just outside Washington, D.C.'s Beltway. Owned by Montgomery County and run by the Strathmore Hall Foundation, it is close to major highways and adjacent to both a Metrorail station and its 2,000-car garage.

The Music Center serves a multitude of purposes. It is a presenting venue (for its first full season Strathmore has corralled more than two dozen acts ranging from Taj Mahal to the Jerusalem Symphony); an expansion venue for the D.C.-based Levine School of Music, CityDance Ensemble, and Washington Performing Arts Society; and the first proper home for two suburban organizations, the National Philharmonic and Maryland Classic Youth Orchestras.

Most significantly, perhaps, Strathmore is also a second home for the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. The *BSO at Strathmore* lineup for 2005-06—including a half-dozen concert series and numerous special presentations—will amount to 35 dates, many of them doubling exposure not only for the orchestra but for the guest artists and entertainers booked at Meyerhoff Symphony Hall, the orchestra's downtown Baltimore venue some 35 miles to the north. It's a precedent-shattering, headline-grabbing move by a major orchestra to establish an audience in a suburb outside its own metropolitan area.

### Art in the Archipelago

Joel Kotkin, a senior fellow at the New America Foundation who teaches urban and suburban history at Southern California Institute of Architecture, noted in a *Washington Post* article last February that "since 1950, more than 90 percent of metropolitan population growth in America has

taken place in the suburbs... 'The burbs' have become the homeland of American success, with an increasing share of our national wealth and half the poverty of the urban core." We may "continue to decry them and make fun of them," he wrote, but "for most of us, [suburbs] represent both our present and our future. Over the next quarter century, according to a Brookings Institution study, the nation will add 50 percent to the current stock of houses, offices and shops, and the great majority of that new building will take place in lower-density locations, not traditional inner cities." Citing another urban analyst, Bill Fulton, Kotkin predicted that city living "will likely become primarily a 'niche lifestyle,' preferred mostly by the young, the childless and the rich. But just as cities won't prosper if they don't cater to the niche resident, the suburbs need to evolve from a pale extension of the city into something more like a self-sustaining archipelago of villages."



Margot Schulman

Yo-Yo Ma was on hand for the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra's debut in the Music Center at Strathmore on February 5, 2005.



There's only so much that suburban cultural facilities can do to create that "self-sustaining archipelago of villages," but they can certainly cater to the communities that, for better or worse, are moving in that direction. Eliot Pfanstiehl, Strathmore Hall Foundation's president and CEO since its inception in 1981, and a lifelong resident of Montgomery County, remembers a time when the federal government dominated the regional economy, when Montgomery was known as the "bedroom of the bureaucrats" and "if you had any interest in high or even medium culture, it was all downtown." He now speaks of Rockville Pike, a stone's throw from the Music Center at Strathmore, as "literally Main Street Montgomery County." Probably the most upscale (and traffic-choked) retail corridor in the mid-Atlantic region, it is Exhibit A in the movement toward a "self-sustaining archipelago of villages" northwest of the Beltway. Exhibit B would be the plethora of county-based employers—high-tech, biotech, professional—that increasingly allow Montgomery County residents, including many of the most likely consumers of "high culture" in the region, to remain outside the Beltway altogether.

Much has been made of the Baltimore Symphony's "encroachment" on a lucrative market so close to Washington. Writing in

When it opens a year from this fall, the Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall in Costa Mesa, California will bring new artistic and audience-expanding possibilities to Orange County's Pacific Symphony.



John Forsyte, president of Orange County's Pacific Symphony, notes that the Elgin Symphony is "addressing what is, in a sense, the sprawl of Chicago. It's not like that in Orange County. Here we're really in our own orbit."

Cesar Pell & Associates

the state, and Montgomery County is a "major population area that we'd had minimal opportunity to serve." The BSO-Strathmore alliance is in fact what allowed Montgomery County and the City of Baltimore—traditionally at odds in the Maryland legislature over allocation of resources—to secure the necessary state funding to make the Music Center a reality: State and county funds, in roughly equal

*The New York Times* last February, for example, Daniel J. Wakin compared it to "the Philadelphia Orchestra setting up shop in Montclair, N.J., a quick commuter ride from the New York Philharmonic." That's a flawed analogy, of course, because a *New Yorker* intent on hearing the Philadelphia Orchestra, or any number of other world-class orchestras, would never have to leave Manhattan. More to the point, Baltimore Symphony President James Glicker says that his own orchestra's survey of ticket buyers for *BSO at Strathmore* events reveals that "the vast majority of them were not regular subscribers to the Kennedy Center; 85 percent of them come from Montgomery, and less than 10 percent from Washington, D.C. People in [that] city have sort of an urban mentality, I think. They want to go to the Kennedy Center." And Strathmore's Pfanstiehl notes that for residents of Northern Virginia—the other large enclave of suburban affluence in metro Washington—as well as for Marylanders to the east and south of the city, the Kennedy Center arguably remains the more accessible venue.

Accessibility is in fact a point of pride for National Symphony Orchestra Executive Director Rita Shapiro. She notes that as a "national monument," the Kennedy Center gets a constant stream of tourists as well as ticket buyers, and a free shuttle runs day and night from the nearest Metro stop. "We can't grow our own stop, but short of that we've done everything we can to make it easy for Metro riders." For those who shun Metro, she concedes, "traffic is a very big

issue, and I think Strathmore is drawing people from further north [in Montgomery County] who would normally not make the trek to the Kennedy Center."

But Shapiro seems unconcerned about losing patrons to Strathmore. "From our analysis, and our understanding of their analysis, people are coming to both venues." Early this summer she told me the NSO was "in a renewal phase for our 75th season, and we're doing just fine, particularly in Montgomery. Certainly we're aware of what's going on in other major venues—it keeps you focused on your own artistic product—but we're hopeful that 'all of the above' is going to be everyone's choice" when it comes to cultural offerings in the metro area.

As for whether the Music Center at Strathmore will steal audience from the Meyerhoff, which is already struggling with attendance levels that sometimes dip below 60 percent of capacity, Glicker notes that "the largest group of Meyerhoff subscribers comes from Baltimore County"—i.e. north of the orchestra's home city, and far from the Music Center. Glicker's predecessor John Gidwitz, during whose tenure the BSO became Strathmore's founding partner in establishing the Music Center, points out that few Montgomery County residents had been attending concerts in downtown Baltimore. They were "not really in an easy relationship with the Meyerhoff and wouldn't normally plan to come up here on a regular basis for their cultural experience."

Gidwitz also notes that the Baltimore Symphony receives substantial support from

amounts, account for about half the cost of the \$100 million Music Center.

Glicker says that the BSO board's "brave" decision to step up marketing and audience outreach at the Meyerhoff, while at the same time making an investment in a second venue that would initially aggravate a substantial structural deficit, was "one of the things that encouraged me to come here" in January 2004 as chief marketing officer. (It was five months later that he was promoted to president.) And the investment in that second venue is a particular source of excitement for Michael Mael, who as vice president for BSO at Strathmore works on-site at the new Music Center. "With a brand-new venue in a brand-new market," he says, "we don't have the weight of history telling us what we can and cannot do. We have a lot more freedom to experiment."

A good example of this is the Mid-Day Serenade Series, "a deliberate attempt to appeal to an older audience that doesn't want to go out at night. These are the only concerts at Strathmore being held for that kind of audience. That's not something we would likely have done in Baltimore, but here because we're starting out we can take a chance. If it doesn't work we don't have to repeat it." If it *does* work, however, it might turn out to be something that could help revive the downtown Baltimore audience as well.

Suburban affluence is hardly sufficient to sustain an orchestra—witness the recent bankruptcy filing of Northern Virginia's 60-year-old Arlington Symphony—and what effect the Music Center will have on

the BSO's financial health remains to be seen. But in the short term the big winner is Montgomery County, which has not only gained easy access to a huge variety of performance offerings but realized the long-held dreams of its resident youth and professional orchestras.

The culmination is especially sweet for National Philharmonic Music Director Piotr Gajewski. Twenty years ago he had selected Montgomery County for his entrepreneurial new venture specifically because of what he saw as an ideal demographic for sustaining an orchestra. An early name change (from Montgomery Chamber Orchestra to National Chamber Orchestra) reflected the group's shifting venues and the need to establish an identity both in Washington and in the county. As the National Philharmonic, it has now shed its chamber-orchestra image and expanded artistically through a merger two seasons ago with Washington's 30-year-old Masterworks Chorus. The new Music Center—in its stage design, aesthetic and acoustical properties, backstage and audience amenities, rehearsal facilities, and office spaces—represents a giant leap forward for the organization as it aims to become the suburban source for symphonic culture northwest of the nation's capital.

### Heartland Harvest

If major highways and proximity to Washington, D.C. have been essential to the cultural growth of Montgomery County, a somewhat comparable situation has driven the destiny of Illinois's Elgin Symphony. On a budget of \$2.3 million, the ESO operates in a city of 100,000 situated 44 miles northwest of downtown Chicago, and presents more than 60 performances a year for an audience in excess of 45,000. "There's been all this growth along I-90," says Executive Director Michael Pastreich. "It's upper-income, upper-education, there will be more and more of those active-living communities for people who are 55 or older but are clearly not old and are not ever going to get old."

A century ago, he says, Elgin was "the center of a large agricultural area. In many ways it's a perfect location for us now, because for 150 years people have been

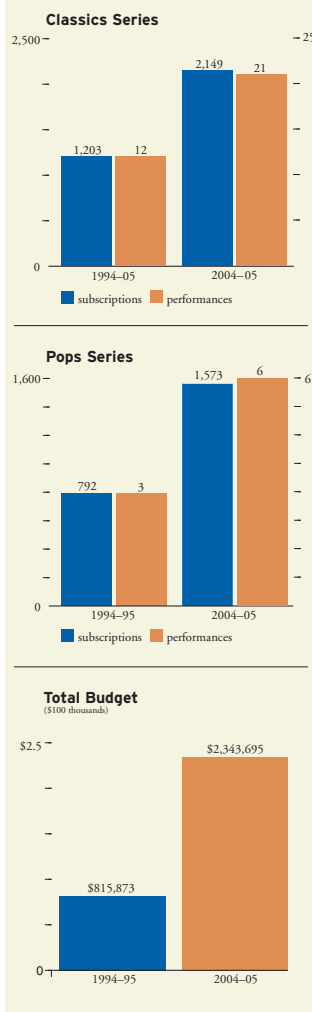
doing business in Elgin, so they're used to coming here for what they need. In the last decade, the suburbs of Chicago have crossed Elgin, so in addition to being a central point we are now also part of a bedroom community. The third major factor for us is that we've got the Chicago freelance pool right around the corner. It's because we get good musicians on the stage that we're doing well."

Doing well has meant, among other things, a 2004-05 season in which total paid attendance at regular-season Classics and Pops Series concerts broke the ESO record by more than 600 seats. Over the previous five seasons, subscriptions to these series saw increases of 55 and 58 percent, respectively.

In Pastreich's view, the rise of high-quality suburban orchestras is strongly linked to what he believes is an overabundance of skilled musicians. Conservatories and music departments, he says, are "turning out thousands of musicians every year, far more than can ever work for Chicago or Cleveland or Boston. If they can't get into an orchestra there, they try Raleigh or Dayton—or Elgin. If they can't get into the Elgin Symphony, they try Northbrook [another suburban orchestra near Chicago]. If they can't get into Northbrook they start their own orchestra. So there are more and more orchestras around the big cities, and they're getting better and better."

At the same time, he says, "it's getting harder and harder [for audiences] to get into the city. I don't think anybody in their right mind thinks the Elgin Symphony is as good as the Chicago Symphony. But I

### Elgin Symphony Orchestra Growth 1995-2005



"Orchestras around the big cities are getting better and better," says Elgin's Michael Pastreich. "And it's getting harder and harder [for audiences] to get into the city."

do think a lot of people are deciding that if they look at the total experience—the price, the convenience, the quality—when they balance it all out, it's just easier to go to the suburban orchestra. While that's good for Elgin, I think it's a bad trend for the field."

Chicago Symphony Orchestra President Deborah R. Card, however, questions whether loyalty to a suburban orchestra rather than a superior one downtown does in fact represent a "bad trend for the field." She acknowledges that "sometimes convenience is more important" to the suburbanite. "People fit orchestras and institutions into their lives as best they can. But I don't believe that suburban orchestras are in competition with us. We're never going to be sorry to have more people loving to hear orchestral music."

A major challenge now facing Pastreich is finding ways to finance construction of a new venue that will allow the orchestra to expand its offerings. The major user of a heavily booked 1,200-seat hall in the city-owned Hemmens Cultural Center, the ESO is "hoping to get closer to 1,800 seats. Next year we're

expanding our Classics Series in Hemmens from seven [triples] to eight. It usually takes us about three years to negotiate dates, and we usually start booking three years in advance." The orchestra has a second venue closer to Chicago—the Prairie Center for the Arts, in Schaumburg—where it has been repeating each of its three Pops concerts and one Classics program. The 450-seat Prairie Center always sells out, and for this season the orchestra will expand the Schaumburg Series to five concerts.

But it is with the City of Elgin that the orchestra identifies, and it's there that the ESO hopes to expand—not necessarily by bringing in more Elginites (research in the late 1990s, says Pastreich, indicated that “everybody in Elgin had made up their minds about whether they were going to come”) but by continuing to market itself as a regional orchestra for northeastern Illinois. Tom Armstrong, principal planner for the City of Elgin, cites figures from the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission indicating that by the year 2030 Elgin’s population will swell from 100,000 to 167,000, while Kane County (whose estimated population as of 2004 was 432,720, according to the National Association of Counties) “will nearly double” with the addition of some 300,000 residents.

A new concert hall near Elgin’s Fox River and the Hemmens Cultural Center—one that would give the ESO “access to more dates and more seats”—is now “in the gray area between dream and plan,” says Pastreich. “Elgin is a community that really, really wants an orchestra. Land has been promised [for a concert hall] if in three years it’s clear that this can go forward.” The city has just redesigned its Riverwalk and built a “palace” of a library as well as a large recreation facility; a city-owned concert hall, he says, “would be part of a \$230 million cultural campus,” with the new library on one corner, the recreation center on another—and on a third corner, a new home for the burgeoning Elgin Symphony.

Pastreich is well aware that “when you add a concert, it doesn’t pay for itself; it puts an incredible strain on the annual fund.” Another caveat of growth, he notes, is the increased cost of doing business in a new hall—sometimes unexpectedly high, as in the case of certain halls that he and Elgin city officials have visited and studied during their planning for a new venue. Strathmore’s Pfanstiehl notes that the new Music Center, having completed its capital campaign, is now beginning a \$30 million endowment drive to help ensure its future as an affordable venue. As insurance against prohibitive rent hikes at any new hall built in Elgin, says Pastreich, “a subsidy has to be developed as part of the budget. It could be an endowment. It

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could also be a new tax. There are a variety of ways to do it. But I think that until it's been identified and enacted, you can't build the hall."

### Planet Orange

In the *Washington Post* article cited earlier, Joel Kotkin observed that "for half a century, legions of planners, urbanists, environmentalists, and big-city editorialists have waged war against sprawl. Now it's time to call it a day and declare a victor. The winner is, yes, sprawl." As orchestras confront the challenges of growth outside the nation's largest cities, it's interesting to see how Michael Pastreich's situation in Elgin is viewed by his California colleague John Forsyte. "Elgin," says Forsyte, "is addressing what is, in a sense, the sprawl of Chicago. It's not like that in Orange County. Here we're really in our own orbit."

Forsyte is president and CEO of Orange County's Pacific Symphony, a \$14 million orchestra that strives to serve what he calls "a confederacy of about 34 cities." Orange County—whose name was added to the Pacific Symphony's moniker in the 2003-04 season as the orchestra celebrated its 25th anniversary by performing in nine cities—has a population of nearly 3 million and "one of the largest economies in the country," says Forsyte. "Its 'gross domestic product' is competitive with some of the smaller European countries. And it definitely does not see itself in any way as a suburb of Los Angeles."

Nor does the county's overall demographic bear much resemblance to the image projected in Fox TV's prime-time soap *The O.C.* Despite pockets of serious personal wealth, Orange ranks only seventh among California counties in average household income, and Forsyte says that anyone expecting a "very affluent, largely Caucasian community would be shocked by the diversity." Santa Ana, the county seat and largest city, "is majority Hispanic. Westminster has the largest Vietnamese population in the U.S. We have our own Chinese American League. There are wonderful assets in the county that give us a unique quality and allow the orchestra to do some interesting outreach."

But these characteristics also present



obstacles that most suburban orchestras do not face, at least not yet. Even without the language barriers implicit in such diversity, getting OCPS's message out is "really challenging," says Forsyte. "The three or four major networks up in L.A. are really diluted in Orange County. There's no distinct media outlet here other than the *Orange County Register* and our public television station KOCE. Billboards are very expensive. Radio and television have been largely unsuccessful. From a marketing standpoint we're really dependent on direct mail, telemarketing, e-mail, promotions in stores. You have to be in their face, because there are so many messages hitting people today in Southern California. It's an intensely consumer society here, and people have to have ten, fifteen, twenty exposures before they decide to take action."

Forsyte sees a visible new hall as a "tremendous opportunity—a new pie with which to carve up the classical audience." And he's eagerly looking forward to the fall of 2006 when the orchestra takes up residence in the new Renée & Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall, now under construction as the centerpiece of a \$200 million expansion of the Orange County Performing Arts Center in Costa Mesa. This 2,000-seat venue, designed by Cesar Pelli with acoustical engineering from Artec's Russell Johnson, "will give us a great opportunity for new kinds of programs, special new series, and repertoire much more intimate than we've been able to offer" in the multi-purpose 3,000-seat hall at the Performing Arts Center that has been the orchestra's principal venue since 1986.

Orange County's Pacific Symphony has a contract that gives it "flexibility to expand when we feel our market will support it," says Forsyte. "We rehearse at night, and during the day our musicians play commercial services and often teach." It's still a per-service orchestra, but for the debut season in the Renée & Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall "we expect to grow about 50 services a year, from 180 to 230. So it's starting to look like a full-time orchestra, in terms of services."

The audience to support that may well be out there. But filling those seats is a

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challenge Forsyte does not take lightly. “While there’s a huge population base, the commutes are horrendous. We estimate the driving times to the hall, and we draw a radius around that to establish our marketing sphere. It’s pretty much the whole county, but there are definitely parts of it that look north [to Long Beach and Los

Angeles], or south to San Diego.” The formidable task confronting the orchestra, says Forsyte, is “winning our entire county’s loyalty.”

Winning that loyalty—and bringing those customers to the concert hall—may be easier for orchestras with a clearly defined suburban identity. Both the National Phil-

harmonic and the Baltimore Symphony have targeted ads economically to Montgomery County’s cable television station, and Glicker says the BSO “advertises heavily on Metro, because we’re right on the Red Line.” Metro, which links the Music Center to both outer suburbs and inner city, is surely on Pfanstiehl’s mind when he speaks of “the Triple A’s of Strathmore: access, aesthetics, acoustics.” Suburbanites do, of course, love their cars—or at least depend heavily upon them—and it remains to be seen whether large numbers of Strathmore patrons will come to equate “access” with a ride on Metro or simply with free parking, a covered walkway from the garage at Grosvenor-Strathmore Station, and proximity to major highways. Surely the automobile will continue to drive audience development at Orange County’s Pacific Symphony—which has explicitly aligned itself with a geographical area rather than a municipal center—as well as in satellite locations like Elgin and Germantown, where civic pride is the driving force.

What effect will the decentralization of orchestral activity have on the quality of life for those who have eschewed downtown in favor of a cultural experience closer to home? In his *Washington Post* exegesis on suburbia, Joel Kotkin opines that “the great challenge of the 21st century—not to mention the main economic opportunity—lies in transforming suburban sprawl into something more efficient, interesting and humane.” Outlying areas may never match the “efficiency” of our great cities in marshalling the talent that has made those cities’ orchestras the equal of any in the world. As for making life beyond the beltway “interesting” and “humane,” however, orchestras that play out of town would appear to have a vital function.

Chicago’s Deborah Card believes they can also help build an audience for the great orchestras that anchor the downtown culture. “Some people may choose to go to the Elgin Symphony,” she says, “but I don’t think they ever choose to go there and never to hear the Chicago Symphony. I think we all serve the greater good of spreading the word about classical orchestral music.” ∞

Chester Lane is senior editor of SYMPHONY.

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