

California Symphony's future looks bright with Aubrey Bergauer on board

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Flash forward to today. In just under a year, Bergauer, 32, has accomplished the kind of turnaround that is increasingly rare in the classical music world.

Even as regional orchestras around the country are scaling back or going under, Bergauer has helped steer the Walnut Creek-based organization back toward fiscal health.

Bergauer, who came to the symphony from posts at Seattle Symphony, Seattle Opera and One Reel, admits the challenges were overwhelming.



Aubrey Bergauer talks about the upcoming season for the California Symphony from her office in downtown Walnut Creek, Calif., on Tuesday, Aug. 11, 2015.

"When I arrived, the organization had been without an executive director for at least a year," she said last week at the symphony's offices. "The 2014 fiscal year had over a quarter-million-dollar shortfall. That's what I walked into."

Undaunted, Bergauer went into full fundraising mode. In her first week, with the aid of a longtime donor, she set up a 30-day matching challenge -- one that raised \$200,000 over the next month.

She scrapped the orchestra's annual fundraising ball in favor of an event geared to a wider audience. The Speakeasy

Symphony, which featured Postmodern Jukebox, a YouTube-savvy music group that covers pop tunes in jazz and swing styles, was held in June at Oakland's Kaiser Center Roof Garden. It was a huge success: "We attracted over 500 attendees, and over half of those were new to the California Symphony," she said.

Bergauer may have been the ideal choice to lead the symphony into a new era. The Texas native says her life seemed to intersect with the organization even before she knew it existed. As a young musician growing up in Houston -- she played the tuba -- she learned music theory from Chris Theofanidis, California Symphony's first Young American Composer in Residence. At Rice University, where she studied music and business, one of her teachers was Rome Prize-winner Pierre Jalbert -- another composer in the long list of starry names who have worked with the orchestra.

Bergauer is gearing up for the 2015-16 season -- the symphony's 29th -- with a first-time special event at the Concord Pavilion, an increase in the number of subscription programs and an expansion of the organization's regional base that includes performances at Napa Valley's Lincoln Theater in Yountville.

First on the schedule is "The Wizard of Oz Live" at the Concord Pavilion. The Aug. 21 event features a showing of the classic film with the orchestra playing the score live.

The subscription season begins Sept. 20 at the Leshner Center for the Arts in Walnut Creek with "Passport to the World." Music director Donato Cabrera conducts the program, a kind of musical world tour that includes Sibelius' "Finlandia," as well as works by Debussy, Dvorak, Elgar, Rimsky-Korsakov and others.

In December, the Pacific Boychoir joins the orchestra in "Traditions New and Old," a program of holiday

favorites (Dec. 21 at the Lincoln, Dec. 22-23 at the Lesher). Concerts in 2016 include "American Roots," featuring works by Stravinsky, Bernstein, Gershwin, Milhaud and Weill (Jan. 24, Lesher), and "Textbook Classics," with music by Mozart, Beethoven and Richard Strauss (March 20, Lesher). The season concludes with "A Grand Finale," featuring the world premiere of a new work by the symphony's Young American Composer in Residence, Dan Visconti, performed by Grammy-winning guitarist Jason Vieaux (May 6, Lincoln Theater; May 8, Lesher). Bergauer is quick to credit Cabrera, who in 2013 became the orchestra's second music director (he succeeded California Symphony founder Barry Jekowsky.) "Donato is a great partner," she said. "He's really taken the orchestra to new heights."

She's clearly passionate about the future -- from the performances in Napa Valley to the symphony's Music in the Schools and Sound Minds education programs.

"Our name is the California Symphony," she said. "To me, that means we can be an orchestra that serves the state. It can mean veterans in Napa, or students in underserved communities. I think we're uniquely poised to do those things and more."

Details: The California Symphony presents "The Wizard of Oz Live," Aug. 21, 8:30 p.m., Concord Pavilion, \$10 students, \$25 adults, 925-676-8742. "Passport to the World" season-opening concert, Sept. 20, 4 p.m., Lesher Center, Walnut Creek, \$42-\$72, 925-943-7469, www.californiasymphony.org.

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