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Princeton Symphony Orchestra Merges With the Annual Princeton Festival



JOINING FORCES: Princeton Symphony Orchestra Board Chair Yvonne Marcuse and The Princeton Festival Board Chair Benedikt von Schröder (seated, foreground) sign off on legal documents formalizing the agreement to merge their two arts organizations. Standing are merger committee members PSO Board Vice Chair Stephanie Wedeking, PSO Executive Director Marc Uys, and former Festival Board Chair Costa Papastephanou.

By Anne Levin

A merger has been announced by two of Princeton's best-known music organizations. The Princeton Symphony Orchestra (PSO) and the Princeton Festival have joined forces under the legal entity Princeton Symphony Orchestra Inc. The Princeton Festival will retain its name as an artistic program of the PSO.

“The merger capitalizes on the strong positions and proven resiliency of both organizations coming out of the pandemic,” PSO Executive Director Marc Uys said in a press release. “With strong artistic leadership, we will pave the way to a new era of creativity, making high-quality performing arts more available to our community and beyond.”

During an interview, Uys said the PSO’s Artistic Director Rossen Milanov will continue as director of the combined organizations. Gregory Geehern, who has been the Princeton Festival’s acting artistic director since founder Richard Tang Yuk left last fall, will be the Festival’s director, operating under Milanov’s guidance.

While patrons of both organizations will not notice dramatic changes in programming, the merger does allow for some new approaches. “People who identify with certain aspects of the Festival are not going to see a dramatic change,” Uys said. “But we want to introduce new things as we go along. This is both a defensive action in terms of what we’re building ourselves to be, which is more resilient. But it is also an almost aggressive action to be proactive.”

The PSO offers classical, pops, and chamber music concerts, as well as educational programming. The Princeton Festival’s summer events have included opera, musical theater, jazz, dance, choral music, an annual piano competition, and more.

Struggling since the pandemic, arts organizations across the country have been streamlining in order to survive. Last week, the Philadelphia Orchestra revealed plans to merge with its landlord, the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts. The Pennsylvania Ballet announced Tuesday that it is changing its name to the Philadelphia Ballet, while redefining its artistic identity.

It was the departure of Tang Yuk from the Princeton Festival that got Uys thinking about a possible merger with the PSO. Having played in the Festival’s orchestra for operas over the years, Uys was familiar with the organization.

“Given that we were in a pandemic, and not doing the things we’re usually doing, I started thinking, what really is the interaction between these two organizations? What are our roles in town, and how do we relate to each other?” Uys said. “I started talking to our board about it, and looking at information. We came to the decision that this was something very much worth exploring.”

The PSO approached the Festival’s board a few months later. A small group from both organizations began meeting, and talked for several weeks. “By the end of December, there was a good feeling of consensus that this was something the Festival wanted to look at more seriously,” said Uys. “We had more formal meetings in the beginning of January. And here we are.”

The initial goal was to define what the merger would be like for both organizations. Next, an agreement on terms was reached. “It takes time,” said Uys. “Because you want to build consensus and involvement from both boards. In any transaction like this, there is a lot of due diligence that needs to take place.”

The merger does not change the way the PSO structures its seasons. “We will continue to offer our subscription series,” said Uys. “What’s interesting is the greater variety of things that are being offered on the artistic level. It’s inevitable that over time, there will be interactions between the two of us.”

For the Festival, the merger means more security and a larger administrative staff. “There isn’t the sense that anything will change and that major things will go away,” Uys said. “One of the core agreements is that we’re doing this to continue the good work the Festival has done up until now. Our intention is to do a fully staged opera each season. We’ll be looking to see how we can develop the structure of the Festival and continue their ‘identity’ events. Those are the things responsible for the strong support the Festival has in terms of audiences and donors.”

The trustees involved in the merger were all volunteers. “It is actually an exceptional model of what volunteerism can be,” said Uys. “The number of hours they spent on this, always being available; it is only because of them that this is possible.”

Both small organizations, the PSO and Princeton Festival have spent the past year simply trying to exist. “Now we have one organization, and we can really think about how we can bring our mission to people we serve,” said Uys. “This is an incredibly exciting opportunity for both organizations. It’s a huge thing for the PSO, and we think it’s a huge thing for Princeton. It enable us to take a much more proactive approach to how we can expand as an organization and serve the community.”

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