

The Norman Philharmonic

Article Lori Johnson March 29, 2017



Keeping the Creative Tempo

It is a universal truth that music is the universal language. It is the soother of spirits and heated rhetoric, it inspires and unites—and for the Norman Philharmonic it bonds different styles of performing arts and music genres together for unforgettable performances.

Now in its sixth year, the Norman Philharmonic Orchestra continues to entertain audiences with unexpected shows. “We have played everything from a Beethoven symphony with ballet, to Handel’s Messiah, to dressing up like a John Phillips Souza band and playing in an outdoor amphitheater,” Norman Philharmonic Artistic Director Richard Zielinski said.

Their most recent concert, “Together We Sing...United We Stand,” incorporated music from American artists ranging from Woody Guthrie and Don McLean, to Bob Dylan, Simon and Garfunkel, and the gospel song “We Shall Overcome,” attributed to the Rev. Charles Albert Tindley. Dressed in street clothes instead of the traditional coats and tails, the performers creatively displayed lyrics to encourage the audience to sing along—definitely not your typical orchestra concert.

“Our vision was to create an orchestra that was more cutting edge—a little bit different,” Zielinski explained. “There is a very successful traditional orchestra in Oklahoma City, so there was no reason to duplicate it. We add another element of creativity to the community.”

The Norman Philharmonic further expands the stereotypical concept of orchestra by infusing different types of art into the performances. “The Phil” concerts have included vocals, dance and film, and introduced living composers.

“For our first concert, Grammy Award-winning composer Libby Larson wrote a symphony called “Forward” and used the elements of the Norman flag for the anthem,” Zielinski said. “As far as I can tell, we are one of the first municipalities in the United State to have commissioned its own anthem and symphony.”

Play On

The genesis for the orchestra came from a University of Oklahoma Andrew Lloyd Webber production, where Zielinski served as music director.

Zielinski also is an OU music professor, director of music ministries at McFarlin Memorial United Methodist Church in Norman, and artistic director and principal conductor of the Classical Music Festival Eisenstadt

Summer Academy in Eisenstadt, Austria.

“It was a big production,” he recalled. “We brought in a director from England who had performed the original show with Webber.” All five shows quickly sold out. Impressed and inspired, Republic Bank & Trust President and community champion Chuck Thompson pulled Zielinski aside and asked how this type of performance could be accomplished in the community. “That is how the Norman Philharmonic began,” Zielinski said.

The Next Set

Three concerts remain in the spring season, the Good Friday and Easter services at McFarlin Memorial United Methodist Church and Voice of Light Voices of Light in OU’s Catlett Music Center. “Voices of Light” incorporates live performances while the silent film “The Passion of Joan of Arc” is playing on the big screen.

“It is a tragic and powerful film about the trial of Joan of Arc,” Zielinski related. “Our music expresses these thoughts and emotions portrayed in the silent film.”

Cost for any performance is only \$10, thanks to community supporters like Republic Bank & Trust.

“Music is an amazing vehicle to reach out to people and get them together. We wanted to make our performances affordable for anyone to attend,” Zielinski said. “Making music universal means bringing it to where the people are, in different forms and experiences.”