

VSO | Conductor enjoys 25 years in Hampton Roads

By Rashod Ollison
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Looking back a quarter of a century, the move was bold, maybe even radical.

Even now, folks in other parts of the world, namely Germany and Austria, where JoAnn Falletta has been a guest conductor, still don't know what to make of her. When the petite native New Yorker stands on European stages to conduct orchestras, she has noticed puzzled looks out in the audience.

But here in Hampton Roads, she has long been a celebrity. As music director of the Virginia Symphony Orchestra, she has helped raise the profile of the organization and has become something of a role model for young female musicians, who account for almost half of current VSO members.

"I'm not sure if that has anything to do with me; I don't know," Falletta says from the cozy VSO office in downtown Norfolk. "There's always a lot of young girls who come up after a concert. Even if they're not involved in music, they want to come and say hello. If that's helped, I'm so glad."

This year is Falletta's 25th anniversary with the VSO. The upcoming season, whose shows were announced this week, celebrates that milestone with a schedule peppered with her "greatest hits," so to speak.

"We tried to bring back pieces or ideas that were important to us over the last 25 years, certain high points," says Falletta, who's 61. "For instance, we've done all the Mahler symphonies, and for a musicians that's a really big deal. They're very challenging for an orchestra."

In October, Falletta and the VSO will revisit Edward Elgar's "Enigma Variations," which was performed at Carnegie Hall in New York City in the spring of 1997.

"It was a very big moment to play on the stage at the center of the music world," Falletta says.

During the first set of shows for 2016, the VSO will come full circle with the inclusion of Béla Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra, which Falletta conducted during her audition for her position.

Before accepting the job as music director, Falletta, a graduate of The Juilliard School, was the director of the Long Beach Symphony. It was a very different experience, she says, because most of its members were part-time. Their full-time

jobs were playing orchestrations for the movie studios, so their attention was a bit fragmented.

"When I came here, it was a different culture," Falletta says. "I had never been to Norfolk. When I got off the plane and saw this sign that said, 'Welcome to Hampton Roads,' I said, 'Where am I? Isn't this Norfolk?' It was a very different and wonderful environment."

She noticed right away the fierce dedication of the VSO musicians.

"They were doing this full-time. That carried a certain seriousness," Falletta says. "They had homes here, children here, their lives were here. I felt a very big responsibility."

Falletta was 36 when she started as music director. And though she came with an impressive resume, there was still much to learn, she says.

"When I first came here I hardly knew how to do it," Falletta says. "I always say that I learned how to be a music director here. These musicians in this orchestra were my greatest teachers. And I learned how to lead an organization from the community, so I think I learned everything here. It was critical to my development as an artist to be here."

Falletta had long since learned to power through the sexism she had seen in the classic music world.

"Even when I was at Juilliard, people were skeptical of the idea. Could a woman do be a director? Could we be strong enough?" she says. "The classical world is such a traditional world. I mean, we're still playing in much the same way that Mozart played, so we haven't changed that much. It's the last part of the music world to open up."

Falletta says she found a gracious and receptive audience in Hampton Roads.

"I really feel that it's something that's very unusual for other audiences in other parts of the world to see a woman up there on the podium," Falletta says. "Here, it's very different, but I still can't take that for granted, because I think the board made a radical decision to go with someone who didn't fit the traditional mold."

She nods and smiles. "At the shows, it's palpable on the stage. We can feel how much this community loves this orchestra."

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2015-16 classics season

The Virginia Symphony Orchestra has released its 2015-16 classics season. Here's a look at the programs.

Opening Night with Sarah Chang: 8 p.m. Sept. 18, Newport News; 8 p.m. Sept.

19, Norfolk; 2:30 p.m. Sept. 20, Virginia Beach

Mahler 5: 8 p.m. Oct. 16, Newport News; 8 p.m. Oct. 17, Norfolk; 7 p.m. Oct. 18, Virginia Beach

Enigma Variations: 8 p.m. Oct. 29, Newport News; 8 p.m. Oct. 31, Norfolk; 2:30 p.m. Nov. 1, Virginia Beach

Handel's Messiah: 8 p.m. Dec. 18, Newport News; 8 p.m. Dec. 19, Norfolk

Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto No. 1: 8 p.m. Jan. 22, Norfolk; 8 p.m. Jan. 23, Newport News; 2:30 p.m. Jan. 24, Virginia Beach

Beethoven Festival Opening: 8 p.m. Feb. 6, Norfolk; 8 p.m. Feb. 12, Virginia Beach

Beethoven Festival Finale: 8 p.m. Feb. 20, Newport News

Cameron Carpenter plays Saint-Saens: 8 p.m. March 11, Newport News; 8 p.m. March 12, Norfolk; 2:30 p.m. March 13, Virginia Beach

Fountains of Rome: 8 p.m. April 1, Newport News; 8 p.m. April 2, Norfolk; 2:30 p.m. April 3, Virginia Beach