

PEOPLE



The Mann for the JOB

HOW THE ARKANSAS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA LANDED ITS NEW MUSIC DIRECTOR — AND VICE VERSA

BY WAYNE BRYAN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY NANCY NOLAN

Philip Mann strides up the hill to the Starbucks in the Heights neighborhood of Little Rock the same way he walked onto the stage to conduct his audition concert with the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra. It is a quick stride, but notable not for the pace but for the posture. Mann keeps his empty hands almost together, as if he were carrying a baton. It must be an occupational hazard — like an editor who reads the paper with imaginary red pen in hand, ever ready to mark a typo.

On that audition night in October at Robinson Auditorium, when Mann may well have won the job as ASO's new music director, the conductor did hold a baton when he leapt to the podium and, an excited heartbeat later, led the orchestra into an opera overture by Mikhail Glinka. The music sparked a stirring of focused attention across the hall; patrons exchanged glances and the lightest of whispers that — *psst* — something special was happening. *Shhh*.



Mann, thirty-two, provokes that same energized alertness when he talks about his new job, which was announced April 1.

"It is easy for an orchestra to become a museum," he says. "What we want to bring to people is a sense that the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra is a living, breathing thing. . . ."

"First and foremost, our goal is to be the best orchestra to Arkansas. We want to make sure the music represents Arkansas. There can be all kinds of connections, from composers or something that is unique to Arkansas. It can also be completely unfamiliar, but we can do it in a way it will have something special for Arkansas."

It is worth noting, after that pro-Arkansas cheer, that Mann hails from Seymour, Indiana, and he arrives here from San Diego, where he served as assistant conductor of the San Diego Symphony. But it's clear that something clicked between Mann and Arkansas. The people who did the hiring at the ASO noticed.

Christina Littlejohn, the executive director of the symphony and a major player in the search for a new ASO music director, says Mann's desire to make the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra truly the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra is a major reason his name quickly topped the list of candidates.

"Most conductors want the orchestra to be nationally known above everything else," she says. "One of the first things a conductor will want is to play Carnegie Hall or go on a national tour. Philip wants the orchestra to be recognized for its service to Arkansas. That is why we are here, to make the orchestra matter to more people, and be important in Arkansas life."

The process that found the new music director and artistic leader of the orchestra may surprise you. It sounds more thorough than the vetting for a vice-presidential candidate — much more thorough if you consider the drive-by vetting that John McCain's team seemed to have given Sarah Palin before the former Alaska governor landed on the GOP ticket — and just this side of confirmation hearings for a Supreme Court justice. That is, it is intense and draining on both candidate and search committee, a semi-ordeal designed to wear down both sides so that, in the end, there is no doubt.

The process began by looking backward. Martin Thoma, chairman of the ASO board of directors, says the eleven search committee members collected ideas from the last search committee that hired David Itkin sixteen years ago. Former ASO board members supplied the institutional memory; members of the orchestra, business leaders, academics, and others on the ASO board made up a selection committee Thoma calls a "pretty smart group." Board members talked with other orchestras, and the League of American Orchestras even provided guidelines on how to recruit a new musical director.

"It was like a cookbook," Thoma says. "We just followed the recipe."

The search drew an array of conductors from around the world. In all, there were 275 applicants.

Two years and hundreds of man-hours were spent reading résumés, references and reviews, watching DVDs and going over submitted materials. However, the

number of top-class conductors is finite, and members of the committee had previously seen some of them.

"Orchestras are looking at guest conductors all the time," says Littlejohn, who was in her first season with the ASO last year. "We can see how conductors engage the audience and mix with the community. We anticipate the new director will be here for ten years or more, so we make sure it is a fit both ways."

With each meeting of the selection committee in 2008, the number of acceptable applicants dwindled until only a dozen remained. Those twelve went through hour-long interviews with committee members. It was in those first talks that Philip Mann went from just another name on the list to a decided front-runner.

"After the phone interview I said, 'This is our guy,'" Thoma recalls. "We still had a lot of things to find out then and any individual can be strong in one of these indicators, but on paper, on the phone, with the public and



the patrons, in rehearsal and on the podium, Philip won all the rounds of a big match."

It's not too surprising given the details of Mann's career. The BBC once called him a "talent to watch out for," during his studies in England, having been the first American elected a Rhodes Scholar in music. Trained as a violinist, he has performed as a soloist, chamber player, concertmaster, and conductor from California to Moscow.

Mann became one of five finalists who each conducted one of the first five concerts of the 2009-2010 season, before Maestro Itkin took the podium for his farewell performance.

When it was time for Mann to meet the orchestra in rehearsal, the committee and others were watching. Every group of musicians develops its own chemistry and its own personality. An unfamiliar conductor has to work with that and make the most of it.

During the first work session, the orchestra responded well to the conductor, says Drew Irwin, co-concertmaster for the symphony and a long-time friend of Mann from their days together at Arizona State University.

"During the rehearsal we found we were doing things we had not done before," Irwin told a friend after Mann's first performance with the ASO. "At the end we were tired, but didn't want it to be over. It was exciting."

"Incredible" was the word Littlejohn used when talking about the audience response to Mann's performances over two nights last October.

The audience comments, written on cards and dropped into baskets at the exits, must have sounded like romantic melodies to orchestra officials.

One audience member wrote, "I had to remind myself to breathe." Another patron said, "I saw color, lights and felt it all."

Impressive as Mann was, several members of the selection committee said all five of the finalists were good. That was only the beginning for what the ASO required. But the search wasn't exclusive to musical ability.

For example, Mann said he wants to bring greater emphasis to the ASO's education program. As assistant conductor of the San Diego Symphony, he was active in the orchestra's outreach to young people.

"Research shows that the largest factor to becoming a future subscriber to an orchestra is if they played a musical instrument as a

kid," he says. "Maybe we can get children excited enough to ask their teacher or parent about studying music."

An orchestra conductor in a city the size of Little Rock and a state the size of Arkansas (that is, intimate and ditto) is something of a public figure, required to face the music from the community, so to speak. He must mix and mingle. He must connect.

So the search committee put the conductors through a gauntlet of interviews and meetings with any number of ASO-oriented folks. The idea was that the community would reveal its personality and the conductor his. Thoma says the relentless schedule "creates a pressure to get real."

The process certainly proved revealing.

One conductor, according to several musicians, refused to interact with the members of the orchestra, staying in an office when not on the podium. Another finalist may have lost the job before he raised his baton, after saying the absence of traffic was the most impressive thing he saw about Little Rock. Another aroused negative responses by insinuating that American audiences might not have the same level of musical understanding found in European concert halls.

In the end, after all five finalists had performed on the stage and off, both the musicians and the audience agreed on Mann. The selection committee and the orchestra board of directors unanimously selected him.

Littlejohn says she was impressed and pleased not only that Mann came to Little Rock with his wife, Tatiana Roitman, but that his mother also attended the concert.

"My parents were in Eureka Springs," Mann explains. "My mother's husband's family owns a bed and breakfast there. My mother called and asked if it was okay if they came to the concerts. I said it was, of course."

It turns out there were several connections between the couple and Arkansas. Mann spent a season with the Hot Springs Symphony and Roitman, a concert pianist, has a fan base from her performances in Garland County during the same time. One of Mann's former violin teachers has retired



to the area. And, when Mann met the principal cellist of the orchestra, the cellist said, "I know you. We were at Tanglewood at the same time."

Roitman joins the University of Arkansas at Little Rock this fall as a visiting artist with the music department, where the couple's former college adviser is chairman of the music department.

Both pianist and music director are ready to call Arkansas home.

"We have made so many friends already that it feels like home," says Roitman.

"From the first moments we were greeted warmly and were welcomed here," Mann says. "They wanted not just the best conductor, but also a good match with the community. That difference is why I went into this profession."

Looking ahead to the ASO season in the fall, Mann says the repertoire will bring "an irresistible energy that will prove the power of music in our lives. We'll perform familiar works in a fresh new light, and for those who have yet to visit the symphony, the programs will be a perfect introduction," he says. "As I look at the season to come, I can hardly wait." ■