

Grammy-winning JoAnn Falletta is Santa Rosa Symphony guest conductor By Diane Peterson THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

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Conductor JoAnn Falletta

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Conductor JoAnn Falletta has always wanted to be in the middle of a symphony, directing traffic.

“When I was 11 or 12, I just fell in love with the orchestra,” she said. “The way I felt listening to this music was incredible, and I wanted to be shaping that .. and be responsible for other people feeling that way too.”

Naturally self-effacing, the petite conductor has learned to shed her shyness and sharpen her leadership skills over the past 40 years, creating an environment for excellence while leading some of the top orchestras in the United States.

“I stand up there in front of 80 people, and I think, ‘How many years have they've studied? How many lessons? How many hours?’” she said in a phone interview from Norfolk, Va. “There's no other team that has the skill set, the imagination and the intelligence of an orchestra.”

This weekend, Falletta will be leading the Santa Rosa Symphony in a challenging, all-American program of contemporary works by Elliott Carter, Aaron Copland, Samuel Barber and John Corigliano.

As one of the highlights of the program Falletta, music director of the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, will bring her concertmaster, Michael Ludwig, to perform Corigliano's virtuosic Red Violin Concerto, which the pair recently recorded together. The album is due out on Naxos this spring.

“It's one of the milestones of the 21st century,” she said of the concerto written in 2003. “It's a wild piece, for the violinist and the orchestra but it's absolutely thrilling.”

Falletta, who also serves as music director of the Virginia Symphony Orchestra, is regarded as one of the world's leading female conductors, second only to Marin Alsop of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra.

From the Long Beach Symphony Orchestra to the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, where San Francisco Symphony Music Director Michael Tilson Thomas cut his teeth, Falletta has made her mark on the U.S. concert stage, earning praise for her kinetic and exuberant style of conducting.

Now just 55 years old — still young in conductor years — Falletta feels she is just entering her prime as a musician and artist.

“First of all, music is endlessly complicated, and the way you see a piece at 25 is different from at 45,” she said. “Plus, dealing with musicians takes a certain amount of life experience, psychologically. There are no shortcuts to that.”

Along the way, Falletta has carved out a reputation for creative programming, garnering 10 ASCAP awards (from the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers) after having introduced more than 400 works by American composers, including 80 world premieres.

Like her former classmate, Santa Rosa Symphony Music Director Bruno Ferrandis, Falletta met a lot of young composers at the Juilliard School and that experience shaped her artistic vision.

“I believe very much in contemporary music, and always have,” she said. “It’s a joyful thing to work with a living composer. I become part of the creative process.”

Falletta deepened her connection with contemporary composers while leading the Bay Area Women's Philharmonic from 1986 to 1996. There, she championed top women composers such as Jennifer Higdon and Ellen Taaffe Zwilich.

“That really enriched my life a great deal,” she said. “My background was so traditional ... It was a great time of discovery for me.”

Outside the concert hall, Falletta is known as a fervent ambassador for music, keeping her subscribers excited while reaching out to new audience members.

Under Falletta's directorship for the past 11 years, the Buffalo Philharmonic has won two Grammy Awards and made 14 recordings. The orchestra's budget has grown from about \$7.5 million to \$10 million, and its subscription base has also grown, despite tough times.

“Buffalo is an old city, struggling financially, but it maintains a connection to the arts and has kept the Philharmonic alive for 75 years now,” she said. “In many ways, the Philharmonic defines that city. It's one of the things the city is proudest of.” Named Buffalo's most influential community leader and artist of the year, Falletta currently serves as a member of the National Council on the Arts, the advisory body of the National Endowment for the Arts.

Raised in Astoria in New York's Queens borough, Falletta fulfilled her immigrant Italian father's dream when she took up the guitar at age 7.

“My parents were great music lovers, but they never had the chance to study,” she said. “The guitar was my father's favorite instrument.”

She credits the subtle nature of the guitar — it's an intimate instrument that doesn't sustain sound easily — with helping prepare her for conducting.

“Playing a harmonic instrument is a good background,” she said. “It helped me to accompany soloists and be listening all the time.”

Falletta spends a lot of time listening to the orchestra when she first steps onto a podium as a guest conductor.

“Your ears are wide open ... and you're watching how they play and how they move,” she said. “You may not know their names, but you know a lot about them musically.”

Her goal is to encourage each musician to be an individual so that the orchestra's personality can shine through. In this way, her approach is quite similar to that of Ferrandis.

“I always felt like he was a kind of kindred spirit,” she said. “We both feel like the musicians are at the core of what we do.”

But it's not always an easy job, she acknowledges, because you're dealing with artists who have the same ego and intelligence as a soloist.

“Those people are so, so gifted, and it can be a very challenging team to deal with,” she said. “Somehow, you have to bring those people together.”

The nice part about guest conducting, however, is that she gets to concentrate solely on the music.

“It's a lovely experience, because you're not worried about ticket sales and personnel issues,” she said. “You're just making music.”

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