



Frequent Flyer

by Ian VanderMeulen

Conductor Michael Christie helms three distinct musical institutions—each in a different region of the country. It helps that he has a pilot's license.

THE IMAGE OF THE WELL-TRAVELED MAESTRO is common in the orchestral world. Many of today's top conductors simultaneously hold a handful of posts in cities as distant and diverse as, say, Bayern, Germany; Berkeley, California; and Montreal, Canada, supplementing that work with international guest-conducting engagements. In fact, with an ever-growing number of part-time orchestras and summer festivals, it has made more and more sense for conductors to patch together a full schedule from several positions.



In this regard, Michael Christie, who has performed in Europe, Australia, and all over the U.S., appears to lead a typical conductor's life. But Christie boasts one credential that most of his peers do not: a pilot's license. Having grown up around planes in Buffalo, New York, Christie is just as familiar with call-signs as tempo markings, and he routinely flies his own plane from one conducting gig to another.

In 2005, The Phoenix Symphony concluded a two-year search for a music director by naming Christie to that post, a relationship they re-upped last year by extending his contract through the 2014-15 season. Also in 2005, Christie took over the same position at the Brooklyn Philharmonic, where I had my first encounter with the 34-year-old conductor, watching him lead a February 2008 performance of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* and a new staging of John Corigliano's *Pied Piper Fantasy*, a dramatically staged flute concerto based on the famous children's tale.

It would be easy to see Christie's artistic existence as a veritable Tale of Two Cities, but over breakfast one Saturday this summer, the conductor is quick to remind me otherwise. Raising three of his fingers in front of him and giving me a characteristically focused stare, he mentions his music directorship at the seasonal Colorado Music Festival in Boulder, "which in many ways is the most important," he says, "because it was the first."

First experiences are memorable for many people. But Christie's fondness for his first directorship is fitting given his propensity to put his orchestras ahead of himself. Catherine Cahill, former president and CEO of the Brooklyn Philharmonic—who worked with Christie at that orchestra from the time of his arrival until last spring when she left to assume a similar post at Philadelphia's Mann Center for the Performing Arts—sums it up best: "Michael is about his institutions," she says, "not about Michael."

In our conversations, Christie focused not on himself but on the initiatives he has helped spearhead at each institution. In Boulder he has cultivated a relaxed atmosphere and networked with other local performing arts organizations; in Brooklyn he has maintained the orchestra's



reputation as an event producer, but also increased the standard repertoire and education initiatives; and in Phoenix he has experimented with alternative concert formats and sought to bring local culture into the dialogue. Each experience informs Christie's work at the other two institutions.

Takeoff

Christie's career path as a conductor is not as accidental as some commentators might have you believe. His interest in music and aviation blossomed around the same time, when he began a weekend job at a small airport in Buffalo and joined the Greater Buffalo Youth Orchestra as a fourteen-year-old trumpet player. About two years later, Christie got the chance to go backstage after a Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra Pops program and meet Associate Conductor Eiji Oue. Their initial conversations grew into regular discussions of score reading and basic conducting. On the encouragement of his trumpet teacher, a member of the Buffalo Philharmonic, Christie entered Oberlin Conservatory in 1992.

Though a trumpet major at Oberlin, Christie also studied conducting with Robert Spano, who would become music director in Brooklyn, and worked with local youth orchestras and church choirs. But Christie points out that one of the best opportunities for honing his conducting chops were the school's winter terms—short periods between semesters when students are able to work on projects outside their normal course load. It was a video of one of these performances—leading a pick up orchestra in Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*—that Christie submitted as an entry to the Sibelius Conducting Competition in Helsinki.

Christie won a special prize for outstanding potential in Helsinki, which is

Christie gives a young student a taste of conducting the Brooklyn Philharmonic.



Johanna Thomsen



Tim Tumble

Christie works with students at Capitol Elementary School in Phoenix.



Colorado Music Festival

Christie interviews violinist Henning Kraggerud during an Intermission Insights session at the Colorado Music Festival. Christie has also brought Intermission Insights to The Phoenix Symphony, where two thirds of the audience typically stays to hear them.

generally pegged as the launch of his career. Indeed, it seems to have opened Christie's eyes to a whole new world. "I had no clue whatsoever that artist managers even existed," Christie recalls, "much less were out there always looking for new people to

represent." This event introduced Christie to IMG Artists, the management company that helped him land his first directorship, with the Colorado Music Festival, in 2003. It proved to be Christie's baptism into the realm of American music directorships: "My accountability to the board, how to have an effective working relationship with the staff, how to build trust and enthusiasm among the orchestra players—that was stuff that I had to just learn on the fly," he says.

By the time he arrived in Brooklyn and Phoenix, Christie says, he had learned "to listen to what the experience had been and to the actual needs of the community, and try to work from that rather than do what I did in Boulder, which was come in with a dream plan," he says. "Taking more advantage of the people that have been with that organization for a while—that was a big take-away from Boulder."

Carving a Niche in New York

The Brooklyn Philharmonic, which begins its 55th season in January, is an orchestra made up of New York freelancers, nestled into one of the city's most diverse boroughs, where culturally savvy audiences present both benefits and challenges. "There seems to be a great tolerance among New York audiences for trying things out," Christie says, "but I think the danger for any performing institution there is that if the level of quality does not meet the adventurousness of the project, the New York audience—because they have so much choice—will quickly move on."

When Christie took over the Brooklyn Philharmonic podium in September 2005, this local idiosyncrasy was already reflected in the orchestra. In order to make the organization competitive in a market led by a standard-repertoire powerhouse like the New York Philharmonic across the river, during his 1996-2004-tenure Spano had developed a signature style in programming. "What I think Bob did so well is create the concert-as-event model," Christie says. "So what I said to everybody was, 'Look, that is a great thing that we can hang our hat on, but we also need to take advantage of the orchestra we have, which is a very fine group of players, and distinguish ourselves not only as event presenters, but as orchestral musicians as well.' I slightly redirected the focus so that we kept the event element as a critical part

of planning, but also to say very strongly in the market, we are going to be the best of the freelance orchestras at playing the great standard repertory as well.”

The talent of the New York City freelance



Brooklyn Philharmonic

Christie has a laugh in his dressing room shortly after arriving at the Ed Sullivan theater for an appearance on *The Late Show with David Letterman*, featuring the Brooklyn Philharmonic and indie singer-songwriter Nellie McKay. The appearance preceded a similar collaboration between the orchestra and McKay at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

pool aids such artistic diversity. Christie points out that the Brooklyn musicians may not have the same cohesiveness and comfort with each other as those in an orchestra like The Phoenix Symphony, which plays together week after week, season after season. But the wide variety of music they must tackle in their careers outside the Brooklyn Philharmonic allows Christie to program adventurously without fazing the musicians.

Christie finds other benefits in having a part-time orchestra made up of freelancers, particularly in terms of community-engagement and education initiatives. “The true beauty of the Brooklyn model is that we have the school-time hours at our disposal, which enables us to put our players directly in contact with those kids,” he says. The institution has linked up with other New York teaching artist programs, and organizes composer mentorships that

allow students to receive feedback from orchestra musicians.

The Brooklyn Philharmonic’s programming aesthetic and community engagement values couldn’t have been summed up better than they were at the orchestra’s February 2 performance at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, part of a week-long celebration for the 70th birthday of John Corigliano. On the first half, the orchestra presented a new theatrical staging of the composer’s *Pied Piper Fantasy*, which engaged both local theater students for the parts of the rats and Brooklyn youth for the children’s march. Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique*, taking up the second half, allowed the orchestra to flex its symphonic muscle. The multidisciplinary aspects of the Corigliano work and the fantastical stories

“I’m trying to slowly take the better attributes of the Brooklyn and Phoenix experiences and sort of blend them together.”

told by both pieces helped give the concert an “event” feel, but for those wanting something more, the orchestra sponsored a mini showcase in the BAM Café free of charge for ticketholders, featuring music by Corigliano protégés Nico Muhly and Jefferson Friedman.

“What we’re trying to do,” Christie says, “is make sure that we can be a model for other orchestras who’ve already got the ‘we can give a concert well’ part down. What often happens with orchestras is that you spend so much time learning the music that you just don’t have a lot of time to hone the experience part of it.” Christie imagines a time when similarly sized and equipped orchestras could contact the Brooklyn Philharmonic, “and we’d be able to offer some easy plug-and-play thinking that would allow orchestras to benefit from our experience.”

Diverse Offerings

The city of Phoenix, recently identified as one of the ten “Best Communities for Young People” by the American Heart Association, is also a Mecca for retirees—a core ticket-buying group for many orchestras. “It’s probably skewed even more

toward people who have had significant orchestral experience,” Christie says of the orchestra’s audience, “and it really puts more pressure on the orchestra. We’re working on gaining the trust of a lot of the people who move from bigger cities—that it’s not just an orchestra out in the sticks. But at the same time, since it is the fifth-largest city in the country, we’ve been working very hard to give new audiences, or less-exposed audiences, more opportunities.”

Since taking over the 62-year old ensemble in August 2005, Christie has sought to engage less-experienced audiences through innovative concert formats. For Intermission Insights, Christie brings a soloist or principal musician back onstage after the concerto for an interview and audience questions. These have proved

extremely popular, Christie says: Instead of leaving the hall during intermission, two-thirds of the audience typically stick around for the session. Another initiative called Keeping Score provides audience members with what Christie calls “real-time program notes.” While some conductors offer pre-concert demonstrations, Christie provides notes that are printed in the program and number coded, with the corresponding number projected on a wall of the concert hall at the appropriate time during the performance.

Christie recognizes that such multimedia experiences may not be for everyone, and has sought to tailor the format of each concert to a particular audience. Thursday night performances, designed for the traditional subscription crowd, are very straightforward, with little talking and multimedia extras. For Friday morning concertgoers—groups from retirement homes or those who don’t drive at night—Christie tries to give a few explanations and a little banter during those concerts. But he saves Keeping Score and Intermission Insights for single-ticket-driven Saturday nights, when they can effectively engage a younger, non-subscribing audience.

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Christie is quick to point out how he feels these initiatives address “churn,” the notion that a low percentage of first-time orchestra-goers return to the concert hall. “The performers onstage have a very strong role to play in getting those first-timers to come back,” he says. “We have to do a whole lot more while we’re on the stage to address those issues, and that’s where I feel we are actually making some serious headway in the companies that I lead.”

Experienced concertgoers, for their part, may be attracted to The Phoenix Symphony now not just because of the heightened artistic level that Christie has helped inspire, but by another Christie initiative: an embedded Baroque ensemble. Made up of a core group of players and others who rotate on a seasonal basis, this group receives coaching from violinist Robert Mealy, an early-music specialist from Yale University who also serves as the Baroque ensemble’s concertmaster. Now in its third year, this smaller chamber orchestra performs Baroque music on period instruments several times a season, including seven to ten performances annually of *Messiah*. “Robert has just opened our eyes and ears to a whole different way of approaching this music,” Christie explains, “and our audience—because a lot of them are kind of music aficionados—have heard this and are staggered by it.” Christie hopes to extend this idea by having new-music and music-education ensembles embedded in the orchestra as well.

“Phoenix is uniquely positioned geographically to take full advantage of anything that’s happening across the border in Mexico and down in South America,” says Christie. With that in mind, he’s not only looking forward to partnering with the Musical Instrument Museum, which opens in Phoenix in early 2010, but to what happens when 27-year-old Venezuelan phenom Gustavo Dudamel takes the reins of the Los Angeles Philharmonic—another city with Latino ties. But The Phoenix Symphony is also delving into Native American culture. “The city of Phoenix is surrounded by Indian reservations,” Christie explains, “so it’s hard not to think about those traditions.” Under that influence, the orchestra commissioned and premiered Mark Grey’s *Enemy Slayer: A Navajo Oratorio*. Employing a libretto by Navajo poet Laura Tohe, the work was

premiered in February 2008, and according to Christie was one of five concerts to sell out during that season.

“I’m trying to slowly take the better attributes of [the Brooklyn and Phoenix] experiences and sort of blend them together,” Christie explains. “So that in Brooklyn, by doing more of the standard repertory and by getting more of the same players every time we play, we’re trying to build a little more sense of cohesion. In Phoenix, we’re saying, ‘Look guys, it’s not only 200 years worth of music, it’s going to be 400 years of music. And we need to figure out how we’re going to do that.’”

Balancing Act

Christie acknowledges that the daunting administrative requirements of a music directorship at one institution—let alone three—require tricky balancing. “Each orchestra has its periods of greater intensity,” he says, “so I try to be sensitive to those timing issues.” Being able to fly also helps. At a Brooklyn Philharmonic luncheon in September, he explained that he prefers flying at night, because of the calmer air and less-burdened air traffic controllers, who are more likely to give direct routes. Flying at night also makes for a reflective experience. “As I cross the country,” he told me later in an e-mail, “I’ll pass over a city and think of friends in the local orchestra and how they are doing. The distance between cities becomes even more apparent at night, and gives me an appreciation for the miles people often go to perform in the U.S.” Fortunately for Christie’s family life, his wife, Alexis, who gave birth to a daughter, Sinclair, this past summer, has been able to take two years off from her own work as a physician, and the trio frequently travels together.

For the success he has had balancing his institutional responsibilities, Christie gives credit to the executive directors at his three institutions, whom he calls his “three leading ladies”: Catherine Underhill, executive director of the Colorado Music Festival; Maryellen Gleason, executive director of The Phoenix Symphony; and Catherine Cahill, who formerly headed the Brooklyn Philharmonic and is now at the Mann Center in Philadelphia. (In November the orchestra named former New York City Opera Executive Director Jane M. Gullong as Cahill’s successor; she

will assume the post January 5, 2009.)

"They're all very driven, individually, about their home orchestras," Christie says, "but I think each of them sees the benefit of the experience I get from the others feeding into what we do in their particular institution. One thing that's been great is that even though they keep an open mind about the experience I'm having, each is very focused on the individual mission of that orchestra. And so that's actually a great grounding for me, because in our discussions I'm not just floating around at the 30,000-foot level. Having that specific drive is a really good motivator and keeps me focused."

Each of these managers recognizes the benefits that Christie brings to their institutions from his other music directorships. Underhill believes the Colorado Music Festival, because of its short, action-packed season, offers Christie a chance to try things out. She mentions Intermission Insights and Keeping Score as prime examples—audience engagement tools that Christie tried out in Boulder that have now flourished in Phoenix. She also points out how ideas flow in the other direction as well: This past summer the festival presented the second performance of *Enemy Slayer*, which Underhill claims wouldn't have been financially possible for the festival to commission on its own, and that collaborations with indie rock bands, which Christie has done at the Brooklyn Philharmonic, seem like a possibility in Boulder as well.

Cahill tells one story that perfectly demonstrates this collaborative attitude among Christie's three organizations. A couple of years ago, she recalls, the Brooklyn Philharmonic "had an invitation to have the orchestra and Michael Christie on the David Letterman show. Michael had something else going on in one of the other places, and I remember his agent saying, 'If he has to swim, we'll get him to the David Letterman show.' My point is there was an understanding on that end and Phoenix's end that we needed a little flexibility."

Maryellen Gleason, executive director of The Phoenix Symphony, is just as enthusiastic about Christie's other work. "I welcome the thinking and perspective he brings back from the other two music directorships," she says, "but I also relish the feedback he brings from his guest

conducting jobs as well." Christie's press coverage in Brooklyn and Boulder has also helped raise The Phoenix Symphony's profile in its home city, Gleason adds.

A Voice for Change

Underlying all his activity in Boulder, Brooklyn, and Phoenix, is Christie's desire to effect positive change, and one doesn't have to look far to find the signs of it at these three institutions. The Colorado Music Festival and Phoenix Symphony have both outlined strategic plans that Christie took part in writing. The Brooklyn Philharmonic, meanwhile, recently obtained a new facility, a former firehouse that the organization will convert into office, rehearsal, and community spaces. Christie hopes that in addition to simply providing the organization with a permanent home, the facility will allow it to explore multimedia offerings like podcasts, an area where he'd like to see the orchestra assume more of a leadership role.

The Phoenix Symphony has outlined a plan to become, as Christie and Gleason both say, "the model 21st century orchestra." But just as important is the goal to become one of the great orchestras of the West—on their own terms. "We do want to play as well as San Francisco; they're amazing," Christie says. "But we also want to be a destination orchestra where people come to experience what we do as a total package because it's compelling in some national or international way."

"I see myself as a person who keeps a very open view of the situation I'm in, so I'm always asking, 'Well, why do we do it that way, and why shouldn't we think about it this way?' The institutions that have those kinds of discussions are open to the idea that while they may be doing great things right now, time moves on and tastes and audience demographics change. And if they're truly interested in me for a position where I would be closely working with them, they have to know that I would be studying that situation very carefully, thinking about what action needs to happen and not resting very well if it wasn't actually moving forward. If we've identified something and agreed on it, it must happen, because life is too short." **S**

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