

New VSO leader wants orchestra to take creative risks



Brent Hallenbeck, Free Press Staff Writer 4:40 p.m. EST December 10, 2015



(Photo: DAMIR ALISA/FOR THE FREE PRESS)

Ben Cadwallader is the new executive director of the Vermont Symphony Orchestra. He's ready for the state's top classical-music ensemble to start losing money.

Cadwallader thinks the VSO can lose money in a good way. He wants the organization that dates back to the 1930s to take more risks.

"We need to think outside the concert hall," he said.

In addition to the orchestra's traditional performances such as Saturday's Masterworks concert at the Flynn Center, Cadwallader would love to organize a hike for listeners to hear a brass quintet on top of Camels Hump have members of the VSO play smaller shows in local clubs or ask the symphony to perform in concert with Vermont-born rocker Grace Potter.

Some of those off-beat performances would invariably lose money. Cadwallader is OK with that.

"Failure is not the opposite of success," the energetic 31-year-old who grew up in South Burlington said last week at the VSO offices on Church Street. "Giving up is the opposite of success."

Cadwallader sees that short-term loss paying long-term dividends, as riskier moves would show that the VSO is striving to attract those younger, newer audiences orchestras around the country are struggling to draw. If the orchestra demonstrates it's allocating resources toward innovation — "Here's how we're going to lose money without turning the lights off," Cadwallader said — he believes it will attract new audiences and new donors.



Ben Cadwallader, a South Burlington native, is the new executive director of the Vermont Symphony Orchestra. (Photo: DAMIR ALISA/FOR THE FREE PRESS)

"Funders are going to be lining up at the door" if the VSO invests in its future, said Cadwallader, who became so excited when talking about the idea that a pen flew out of his fast-moving hands. "This is venture capital."

Cadwallader began Nov. 8 at the VSO. He replaces Alan Jordan, who left the executive director's post this spring after 16 years and is now executive director of the Delaware Symphony Orchestra.

The VSO brought in almost \$1.7 million in revenue in 2013-14, the most recent figures available, and spent just over \$1.5 million in that span. When orchestras talk of "responsible" spending, Cadwallader said operating in the black is part of that, but it's also about a commitment to the future.



Ben Cadwallader, who grew up in South Burlington, is the new executive director of the Vermont Symphony Orchestra. (Photo: DAMIR ALISA/FOR THE FREE PRESS)

The classical-music world is filled with “antiquated thinking about this art form,” Cadwallader said. “All problems that orchestras face come down to audience.” Many in the industry think “millennials,” those in their 20s and 30s, are the “golden goose” for orchestras, Cadwallader said, and if classical organizations expect their musicians to be creative administrators have to be creative as well.

“We can redefine what the hometown symphony can be,” Cadwallader said. “That’s where the industry is going.”

He thinks alternate venues for VSO performances such as ArtsRiot in Burlington’s South End, where Cadwallader was scheduled to meet with owners this week, might help bring classical to new audiences. The VSO already has traditional classical-music fans in its corner, and Cadwallader said it can reach progressive music listeners who go to Higher Ground to hear rock bands, follow their favorite performers around the country and would get into classical music if they’re shown something different.

“New audiences like new art,” he said, citing a recent pairing by the Los Angeles Philharmonic of an avant-garde Finnish composer with Ravel to show the atonal seeds in the latter’s work. “We don’t need to apologize for presenting good ‘classical music.’ Good music is good music, period.”

Cadwallader knows about that LA Phil program because he just came from that orchestra, where he was education programs manager. Before that he worked in Texas at the Youth Orchestras of San Antonio for Troy Peters, YOSA’s music director and former music director of the Vermont Youth Orchestra, where Cadwallader played oboe between 1995 and 2003.

Youthful maturity

Cadwallader was born outside Philadelphia and came with his family to Vermont when his father, Warren Cadwallader-Staub, took a job with the new Wake Robin retirement community in Shelburne. The first concerts he remembers attending were VSO performances.

“I fell in love with music listening to this music,” Cadwallader said. He began playing the oboe in sixth grade at Tuttle Middle School in South Burlington.

Peters, speaking by phone Monday from San Antonio, remembers his first impression of Cadwallader at the VYO as “a tiny little middle-school oboe player who was on the one hand very serious and industrious and focused and on the other hand the class clown.”



(from left) Ben Cadwallader-Staub, then 16, of South Burlington, talks with fellow oboists Emily Trono of East Montpelier and Dean Calagni of South Burlington at a Vermont Youth Orchestra rehearsal at Burlington High School in 2001. (Photo: FREE PRESS FILE)

He became a fine musician, Peters said, but because of his smarts and likability Cadwallader stood out for his leadership. The VYO moved into its new home at the Elley-Long Music Center in Colchester during Cadwallader's tenure in the orchestra, and as a result decided to do away with its popular residential off-site summer camp and have an in-house day camp at Elley-Long instead.

The VYO asked Cadwallader to set a positive tone for his fellow students, and according to Peters the young musician "showed up every day like it was the most exciting week of his life" even though he missed the residential summer camp, as did his fellow musicians.

"That kind of maturity really stood out to me," Peters said.

Cadwallader pursued a musical career by studying at the Mannes School of Music. He graduated from that New York City school in 2007 and faced a decision on whether to pursue a master's degree in performance.

He interned with the New York String Orchestra Seminar, where the VSO's music director, Jaime Laredo, is artistic director and conductor. Cadwallader called Laredo a "kind, humble, genuine" person and said Laredo and the New York String Orchestra Seminar gave him a great introduction to arts administration. Cadwallader said he realized his skills in and passion for administration outweighed his skills and passion as a musician, and his internship led to a job with the New York String Orchestra Seminar that set his young career as an arts administrator in motion.

"What gets me out of bed in the morning? The orchestra will live forever; that is a fact," Cadwallader said, referring to orchestras in the general sense. "And it's our job to make sure that happens."

'A rising star'

Peters left the VYO for the Youth Orchestras of San Antonio, and when an opening came up at the Texas organization for an operations director he said he knew Cadwallader was the right person for the job. He needed someone to serve as a liaison between the organization and the musicians and their families, and Peters said Cadwallader had the institutional intelligence as well as the charisma to fill that role.

"I just thought he was a perfect match," Peters said. "He came to San Antonio and transformed the energy of our membership. He was part of creating a sense of loyalty and enthusiasm about what we were doing."

Cadwallader left for the Los Angeles Philharmonic. "Very quickly people realized he was a rising star," Peters said, noting that Cadwallader's latest move is mutually beneficial. "I think it's a home run for the VSO and of course it's a great opportunity for Ben. I believed wholeheartedly that in the next decade Ben was going to become executive director of an American symphony orchestra."

While he's focusing on some of the VSO's financial and operational issues, Cadwallader said he's not worried about the orchestra's musical quality under Laredo's leadership. "The orchestra has risen to Jaime's level of excellence," he said of the Grammy-winning violinist and conductor.

Cadwallader said growing up in Vermont was “incredible,” but he was excited as a teenager to leave his rural home state for New York City. Now he’s just as excited to be back in Vermont. His father died in 2003; his mother, Julie Cadwallader-Staub, lives in South Burlington. Cadwallader said the tug of Vermont’s natural beauty and supportive people pulled him back.

“I think what it boils down to is state pride,” he said from his office overlooking the Church Street Marketplace. “The people who live here are just so happy to be here. That does something to the community’s overall health.”

A previous version of this story misidentified Cadwallader’s mother, Julie Cadwallader-Staub.

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Jose Daniel Flores-Caraballo directs the Vermont Symphony Orchestra at Saturday’s Masterworks concert in Burlington. (Photo: COURTESY)

If you go

WHAT: Vermont Symphony Orchestra Masterworks concert featuring the VSO Chorus directed by Jose Daniel Flores-Caraballo and works by Schubert, Sibelius and Dvorak

WHEN: 8 p.m. Saturday

WHERE: Flynn Center, Burlington

TICKETS: \$9-\$61. 864-5741, www.vso.org (<http://www.vso.org/>)

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