

## The World of Classical Music

### An Interview with Gerard Schwarz, Music Director, Palm Beach Symphony

**EDITORS' NOTE** In his nearly five decades as a respected classical musician and conductor, Gerard Schwarz has received hundreds of honors and accolades. Over the years, he has received nine Emmy Awards, 14 GRAMMY nominations, eight ASCAP Awards, and numerous Stereo Review and Ovation Awards. Internationally recognized for his moving performances, innovative programming, and extensive catalog of recordings, the American conductor serves as Music Director of the All-Star



Gerard Schwarz

Orchestra, Eastern Music Festival, Palm Beach Symphony, and Mozart Orchestra of New York, and is Conductor Laureate of the Seattle Symphony Orchestra and Conductor Emeritus of the Mostly Mozart Festival. He is Distinguished Professor of Music – Conducting and Orchestral Studies of the Frost School of Music at the University of Miami and Music Director of the Frost Symphony Orchestra. His considerable discography of over 350 albums showcases his collaborations with some of the world's greatest orchestras including The Philadelphia Orchestra, London Symphony Orchestra, Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra, Orchestre National de France, Tokyo Philharmonic, Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, New York Chamber Symphony, and Seattle Symphony Orchestra, among others. In 2017, *The Gerard Schwarz Collection*, a 30-CD box set of previously unreleased or limited release works spanning his entire recording career, was released by Naxos. Schwarz began his professional career as co-principal trumpet of the New York Philharmonic and has held Music Director positions with the Mostly Mozart Festival, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, and New York Chamber Symphony. As a guest conductor, he has worked with many of the world's finest orchestras and has led the San Francisco, Washington National, and Seattle Opera companies on many occasions. He is also a gifted composer and arranger with an extensive catalog of works that have been premiered by ensembles across the United States, Europe, and Korea. Schwarz is a renowned interpreter of 19th century German, Austrian, and Russian repertoire in addition to his noted work with contemporary American composers. He completed his final season as Music Director of the Seattle Symphony in 2011 after an acclaimed 26 years – a period of dramatic artistic growth for the ensemble. The City of Seattle named the street alongside the Benaroya Hall “Gerard Schwarz

Place” in his honor. His book, *Behind the Baton*, was released by Amadeus Press in March 2017.

**SYMPHONY BRIEF** *Palm Beach Symphony* ([palmbeachsymphony.org](http://palmbeachsymphony.org)) is South Florida's premier orchestra known for its diverse repertoire and commitment to the community. Founded in 1974, this 501(c)(3) nonprofit arts organization adheres to a mission of engaging, educating, and entertaining the greater community of the Palm Beaches through live performances

of inspiring orchestral music. The orchestra is celebrated for delivering spirited performances by first-rate musicians and distinguished guest artists. Recognized by The Cultural Council for Palm Beach County with a 2020 Muse Award for Outstanding Community Engagement, *Palm Beach Symphony* continues to expand its education and community outreach programs with children's concerts, student coaching sessions and master classes, instrument donations, and free public concerts that have reached more than 56,000 students in recent years.

#### Did you always know that you had a passion for music and where did this interest develop?

I have had a passion for music since I was a young boy. There was a pivotal point where my whole world changed when I was 12 years old. While performing the Sibelius Second Symphony at the National Music Camp in Interlochen, Michigan, the music was so touching that I decided there was a possibility I would become a professional musician. I thought music could become the most important part of my life.

#### How do you define the role of a Music Director and has the role evolved over the years?

Music directors are different with every orchestra in every country, especially in Europe. Essentially, the role is to inspire the orchestra and conduct great concerts. Furthermore, they pick soloists and programs to conduct. In the United States, the role often is more involved – we collaborate with guest conductors and guest soloists to help with the programming, and we work with every department of the orchestra's administration from marketing to fundraising. We aren't the primary person involved, but we just make observations. Our responsibility, of course,



Gerard Schwarz conducting the Palm Beach Symphony (above and opposite page)



is musical so it relates with the performances, the quality of the orchestra, and guests.

**What excited you about the opportunity to join Palm Beach Symphony and made you feel it was the right fit?**

When I was a guest conductor with the Palm Beach Symphony, we did Bruckner's Seventh Symphony. I was immediately taken aback with the collaborative, dedicated attitude of the musicians. They clearly wanted to produce a great concert. I was also very impressed with the audience in Palm Beach. We all know of Palm Beach as a very special place in our country, but I had no idea that it had such a strong cultural identity and desire to have a wonderful orchestra in its community. The combination of the excellence of the orchestra, the wonderful administration and board, and the committed audience made it a natural fit for me. So, when I was offered the position, I did not hesitate to accept. It has been quite a wonderful time that will happily be continuing for many years.

**How do you describe the Palm Beach community's commitment to arts and education?**

It seems to me that the Palm Beach community has a tremendous thirst for art, whether it be through the Norton Museum of Art, through the ballet and opera, or especially through the Palm Beach Symphony. People who live in Palm Beach care about education. They care about educating the children in the community. They care deeply about being involved in cultural activities. Not every community is like that. Some cities feel like there's not enough interest by enough people. But in Palm Beach, one feels that there's hardly a person who isn't involved in the arts in some fashion. This is unique and very special. One can look to cities like

New York to see a similar involvement. But Palm Beach is extraordinary in that way.

**Will you discuss Palm Beach Symphony's commitment to music education and its initiatives in this area?**

We have a tremendous commitment to educating the youth of our community. One of our programs is accepting donated instruments which are then repaired and given to deserving students throughout Palm Beach County. We also hold an annual TV program, and we are creating a library of educational television through our association with South Florida Public Television. We also go into the city, into the schools, and into the communities and give short concerts for the students in their own environment. Additionally, we bring them into the Kravis Center to hear the orchestra in our home. We have an extraordinary staff, including Director of Artistic Operations, Olga Vazquez, that helps us make this an important part of who we are.

**What do you feel is Palm Beach Symphony's responsibility to the community it serves and to be engaged in the community?**

Every orchestra must be engaged in the life of its community. Some of the ways we engage are through education, exposure, and performances. We try to go out into the community as well as bring the community to the orchestra. I believe that we are working very hard in this area so that we can be identified as an important part of Palm Beach.

**You have been a leader with some of the most respected and renowned orchestras during your career. Will you discuss these experiences and how your career has evolved?**

I've been very lucky in my life to have conducted some of the greatest orchestras in the world and to have been the music director in some

of the great cities of the world. In each case, I have grown as an artist and learned from those experiences. The great thing about being a conductor is that as wonderful as we can be as young musicians, experience and the depth of understanding – not only of the music, but about the community we serve – comes with experience and with longevity. Luckily, I have that and hopefully I can bring all of those experiences from Los Angeles, New York, Liverpool, and elsewhere to Palm Beach.

**You devote your time and expertise to teaching the next generation of industry leaders. What has made teaching so important to you and what are the key messages you want to convey to your students?**

As a conductor, in a sense you're always a teacher. You're guiding the orchestra, but at the same time, you're teaching. At this time in my life, to have the great honor of working with incredibly gifted young students is very gratifying. What I try to bring and teach them is a great love of the art and a great love of performing for a large and diverse audience. It is very exciting to share many of the experiences and knowledge I have gained from my years of working with orchestras with these incredibly gifted young people.

**How concerned are you about the reduction of arts and music programs in middle schools and high schools, and how important is it for music to remain a part of the curriculum in schools?**

Of course, I've been concerned over many years now about the reduction of education in public schools. That said, I do believe that we are headed in a very positive direction right now with many schools understanding the great value educationally of teaching music. As a result, finally, we are seeing an uptick in music education programs in schools, and I think that is for two reasons: one is because of the intrinsic value of the music itself. For the educators, the students do better in every subject if they actually play a musical instrument. Second, we look for large numbers in our orchestras or bands or choruses, and as a result this is very attractive, I think, to many of the leaders in the public schools. But I think the most important thing for me, of course, is the great value of great music. For an educator who may have little interest in music, it really does help with math, science, and every other subject – we've seen that countless times. So we have the saying, "You want to fix schools in the United States? Then teach everybody music."

**You have achieved many accolades and awards during your career. Are you able to enjoy the process and take moments to celebrate what you have accomplished?**

I'm always happy to celebrate my accomplishments, but what's really important to me is the future. Everything I do is geared towards how we can better serve our communities; how we can increase the audience; how we can bring this great art form to more people; and how we can educate more people. So, though it's wonderful to receive honors, it's much more rewarding to actually be involved with seeing the progress that we all are trying to make with exposure and education in the world of classical music. ●