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Flower Mound Community Orchestra director brings 'warm,' 'energetic' style to job

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Esteban Rojas turns to face the audience as applause fills the chapel area of Trietsch United Methodist Church in Flower Mound.

In a photograph taken that night, he smiles, appreciative of the standing ovation. The orchestra has just completed its Fourth of July concert. The air conditioning ripples a large American flag secured above the local musicians behind Rojas, who was appointed the Flower Mound Community Orchestra's music director in January.

"I think that the energy and the love of the people that play in the orchestra are outstanding, and [the] level of commitment is unique. When you work in that environment, the only result is excellence," he said.

Rojas is apparently doing something right.

Tom Williams, president of the orchestra's board of directors, said that the concert was one of the most successful ever. Donations this year tripled those of past years. Williams said the orchestra has had three concerts with Rojas and that the Fourth of July concert was almost standing room only, with nearly 1,100 people. He said Rojas got the audience so revved up he had to do an encore performance of "Stars and Stripes Forever."

"Esteban has really energized the entire group," Williams said. "He's warm, he's energetic, he's engaging and people want to play for him. In my experience with the board, the most I've ever seen is eight people auditioning. We have over 30, and some very experienced musicians who want to play with us."

Rojas, born in San José de Costa Rica and raised in Colombia, has been a music student since childhood. He said that, according to his parents, he started learning violin and guitar when he was just 2 years old. He learned piano at 13.

Rojas decided to explore conducting when he graduated from high school. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in music in Orchestral Conducting from the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in 2001.

After graduation, Rojas said he served as a principal conductor for more than 400 performances at two of the Colombian wind symphonies.

Rojas has had significant experience with youth orchestras. His passion for youth and community orchestra began in Colombia, where he guest-conducted at some of the country's major youth orchestra programs and conservatories. Rojas said he has had a long-term relationship with BATUTA, what he called the second largest El Sistema program in the world. El Sistema is the famous Venezuela youth orchestras program.

Rojas founded the Youth Symphony Orchestra of Fine Arts of Cali Conservatory at the Instituto Departamental de Bellas Artes in 2005. There, he served as the conductor and music history professor until September 2010. Rojas said the conservatory is now one of the largest and most famous orchestras in his country.

Rojas came to the United States in 2010 to attend Texas Christian University on full scholarship. He earned his master's degree in orchestra conducting in 2012.

Rojas has served as fellow conductor of the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra under Miguel Harth-Bedoya. Since his arrival in the United States, Rojas has conducted TCU symphony, Fort Worth Youth Orchestra, Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra, Las Colinas Orchestra, Fort Worth Civic Orchestra, Sinfonietta of Fort Worth and the Pan American Ensemble, which features 20th Century music.

Rojas was appointed the general director of the El Sistema-based B Sharp Orchestra in Fort Worth as he approached TCU graduation in 2012. As director of that program from February 2012 to May 2014, he created the B Sharp Youth Orchestra. He recently stepped down from the orchestra whom he was with after he heard about the FMCO job opening.

FMCO is comprised of three musical groups. The preparatory orchestra is an educational group for new musicians with two to four years of experience. The philharmonic orchestra is also an educational group for musicians with more than five years of experience. The preparatory and progressive orchestras are open to all ages. The advanced, symphony orchestra is for players older than 18 who play at an advanced level.

The preparatory and philharmonic orchestras provide a venue for beginner and intermediate musicians to develop and hone their skills while gaining opportunities to perform. The tiered structure provides an environment where musicians can advance as they develop skills.

Rojas learned that the FMCO was looking to grow its preparatory group, which he considers a very important aspect of the orchestra. In his new position, he will conduct both the symphony and preparatory groups.

"It's important that someone with good experience takes over that orchestra," Rojas said. "So, I offered my help and the orchestra said yes. It has been a great experience."

Rojas hopes to enlarge the orchestra and grow them artistically by playing a new repertoire. Rojas will also use his own arrangements and adapt symphonies for beginners. He said it is a proved and effective way to grow beginning orchestras.

The orchestra is planning a concert next year honoring the memory of late FMCO music director Paul Gregory Bonneau, who died last year, and will play many of Bonneau's compositions.

Rojas said that the orchestra had its first chamber music concert and that he is planning two strictly chamber music concerts a year. Playing chamber music allows the groups to play more often because they can perform in places like libraries and schools; and, it allows more opportunities for the musicians to play.

"It's important for an orchestra to be able to play in small ensembles and chamber music," Rojas said. "That is a way to reach out to more audience and more people."

The orchestra has not yet played Columbian national music, but he hopes to integrate Latin American rhythms into the repertoire.

But, new repertoires mean buying new sheet music and playing rights, which can be expensive. This is part of a broader consideration: budget and money to support the orchestra.

"We survive by the people that have been generous to the orchestra. We have annual banquets to raise money," Rojas said. "The one that we had this year was great. We had a lot of support."

Rojas said that as a conductor, he could also select music that does not require such expensive sheet music.

FMCO concerts are free and the musicians are all volunteers. The orchestra, a nonprofit organization, receives some funding from the students in the preparatory and philharmonic levels. Scholarships and family discounts are available.

Rojas intends to support and discover new soloists and talents within North Texas by giving opportunities to local university students. He also wants to build relationships with Colombian orchestras for young outstanding musicians looking for opportunities to shine in the United States.

Rojas said the next symphony orchestra concert will feature an SMU violinist Eleanor Dunbar playing the Mendelssohn Concerto in E Minor. The orchestra will also play Beethoven's Symphony No. 2 and Leonard Bernstein's Overture to Candide.

Symphony Orchestra rehearsals resumed Aug. 25. Preparatory and Philharmonic Orchestras rehearsals resume Sept. 2.

Preparatory and Philharmonic Orchestras fall concert will be at 7:30 p.m. on Tuesday, Oct. 21. Symphony Orchestra will have its fall concert at 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 1.

Lewisville/Flower Mound editor Adam Schrader can be reached at 214-773-8188 and @schrader_adam on Twitter.

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Staff photo by ADAM SCHRADER/neighborsgo

Natalie Thompson (left), a junior at Marcus High School, auditions recently for a spot playing double bass for FMCO.

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Submitted photo

Esteban Rojas conducts the Flower Mound Community Orchestra during a concert earlier this year. Rojas, who was born in San José de Costa Rica and raised in Colombia, was appointed to be the orchestra's music director in January.

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