



Photos by Wade Caldwell

# *Symphony of the Americas: A Growing Cultural Force*

BY LEON M. RUBIN

The Symphony of the Americas is based in Broward County, but its reputation spans the globe. With a budget exceeding \$1 million for the first time this year, the 60-member orchestra has established itself as a cultural force in less than two decades.

With roots extending to 1987, the organization leapt forward in 1991, when Maestro James Brooks-Bruzzese was appointed musical director and it became known as the Sinfonia Virtuosi and Chorus of Florida. That year also saw the start of a longstanding partnership with the Broward Center for the Performing Arts – where the Sinfonia performed for the official gala opening of the Amaturio Theater – as well as the inauguration of Summerfest.

The organization, which adopted the name Symphony of the Americas in 1995, has grown steadily in stature. Case in point: In October 2005, Maestro Brooks-Bruzzese was the arts honoree at the National Hispanic Heritage Awards at the Kennedy Center in Washington. The Symphony's programs, which reach audiences in Florida and the Americas, are wide-ranging.

## *Subscription Season*

More than just concerts, each of the Symphony's Broward Center dates is an event preceded by wine tastings, music by local ensembles and pre-concert lectures by Lyn Farmer, former classical music program director for WTMI-FM.

"We try to do something that makes us a little different and appealing," LaBonte explains. In the upcoming season, that approach will lead to a special concert tribute to Hispanic Heritage Month on October 24 featuring Uruguayan pianist Enrique Graf, and a pre-Valentine's Day evening of Spanish and Italian love songs on January 30, 2007 – complete with champagne and chocolates!

Extending the reach of the subscription series are community outreach performances in Weston, Pompano Beach and Palm Beach County. The 2006-2007 schedule is available at [www.symphonyoftheamericas.org](http://www.symphonyoftheamericas.org).

## *Educational Outreach*

"Music reaches to the minds of the children," observes Maestro Brooks-Bruzzese. "Through our educational programs, we want to create

diversity and introduce children to different ideas. Music teaches patience. It teaches them how to think mathematically. It opens their minds to literature."

The Symphony participates in the SEAS (Student Enrichment in the Arts) partnership with the Broward Center and Broward County Public Schools. It takes ensembles into schools, presents "Peanut Butter 'N Jamboree" and "Jack O'Lantern Jamboree" family concerts and reaches at-risk children in partnership with the Bonnet House in Fort Lauderdale. Together, these initiatives reached an estimated 35,000 people last year.

"It's such a joy to teach and speak to children with respect and let them know that music is not beyond them," says Tim Byrns, the Symphony's principal cellist and coordinator of the Bonnet House program. "One little thing sets a spark and you see a light go off in a child."

## *Summerfest*

The crowning achievement of the Symphony of the Americas' relatively brief history is its Summerfest  
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Women's Theatre Project, August 10-27, PPTOPA  
at Cooper City Theatre

Theater. 954-467-6637  
or 954-463-IMAX.

## theater

### MONDAYS

*Tour.* 1 p.m. Broward Center  
for the Performing Arts.  
954-462-0222.

### WEDNESDAY - SUNDAY

*Laffing Mattered Comedy  
Dinner Theater.* Laffing  
Mattered, Fort Lauderdale.  
954-763-5236.

### JULY 1 & 2

*Al Madrigal.* Improv Paradise  
Live. Seminole Hard  
Rock Casino. 954-981-5653.

### JULY 6 - 9

*Godfrey.* Improv Paradise  
Live. Seminole Hard Rock  
Casino. 954-981-5653.

*City Theatre's Summer  
Shorts Festival.* Broward  
Center for the Performing  
Arts. 954-462-0222.

### JULY 7

*11<sup>th</sup> Annual Summer  
Talent Show.* Hollywood's  
Brightest Stars. Summer  
Camp students. 7 p.m.  
South Broward High  
Auditorium. 954-921-3404.

### JULY 7 - 16

*Pirates of Penzance.*  
Fort Lauderdale Children's  
Theatre. Hollywood  
Playhouse. 954-763-6701.

### JULY 7 - 20

*Gypsy.* Pembroke Pine  
Theater of Performing Arts.

The River of Grass Theater.  
954-437-4884.

### JULY 27 - 31

*Kevin Nealon.* Improv Paradise  
Live. Seminole Hard  
Rock Casino. 954-981-5653.

### JULY 28 - SEPTEMBER 10

*ART.* The Broward Stage  
Door Theatre. 954-344-7765.

### AUGUST 15

*ArtsEXPRESS.* Jaime Lom-  
bana. 5 - 6:30 p.m. Broward  
County Main Library  
Auditorium. 954-462-8190.

### AUGUST 10 - 27

*Memory House.* By Kathleen  
Tolan. The Women's Theatre  
Project. PPTOPA at Cooper  
City Theatre. 954-462-2334.

### SEPTEMBER 19

*ArtsEXPRESS.* 5 p.m. Brow-  
ard County Main Library  
Auditorium. 954-462-8190.

### SEPTEMBER 24

*BCC Comedy Show.* Bailey  
Concert Hall. 954-201-6308.

### SEPTEMBER 28 - OCTOBER 22

*Red Light Winter.* By Adam  
Rapp. Southeastern US  
Premiere. Mosaic Theatre.  
954-57-STAGE.

### SEPTEMBER 29 - OCTOBER 15

*Jake's Women.* Pembroke  
Pines Theatre of Performing  
Arts. PPTOPA@Cooper City  
Theatre. 954-437-4884.

### SEPTEMBER 29 - NOVEMBER 19

*Five Guys Named Moe.*  
Broward Stage Door  
Theatre. 954-344-7765.

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cultural exchange program. Inspired by Maestro Brooks-Bruzzese's Latin-American roots, the annual series pairs a handful of the Symphony's own musicians with internationally renowned chamber orchestras.

This year, the 14th annual Summerfest features the I Musici Estensi Orchestra from Milan. Maestro Brooks-Bruzzese and his colleagues traveled to Italy in May and June for rehearsals, performances and recording sessions with I Musici. Then, in July and August, the Italian orchestra comes to the U.S. to perform with their Symphony counterparts in Broward County as well as throughout Florida and in Argentina and Panama.

"Summerfest brings top performers to audiences that might otherwise never have the opportunity to hear such world-class quality," LaBonte notes. "We offer ticketed concerts for the public and free educational concerts. We go into conservatories and schools to do master classes. That's part of our mission."

Last year, in partnership with Rotary International and the International Sister Cities Program, Summerfest musicians performed in Haiti and participated in humanitarian work – including potable water, reforestation and computer access projects – with support from funds raised in South Florida. "Our goal is not only to give wonderful performances but to make sure there's a measurable outgrowth in the communities," LaBonte says. "We planted fruit trees. Many of the musicians left money for rice and beans for the people in the village. The mayor in one city was in tears. He said they had never had anything like this before." A benefit concert for this year's program in Haiti is scheduled for July 22 at the Broward Center.

### *A Cultural Institution*

With its 20th anniversary season just a year away, this globetrotting orchestra clearly is doing things right. "I see steady growth," says cellist Byrns. "A lot of musicians and organizations want fast growth, but if you spread yourself too thin you're unable to adequately supply the quality the public needs. We're trying to grow in small baby steps."

LaBonte notes that Bogdan Chruszcz, who was concertmaster of the Florida Philharmonic, is now the Symphony's concertmaster. "Four or five musicians from the Philharmonic who moved away like working with us so much that they fly in or drive in for rehearsals and performances," she adds.

"The Symphony of the Americas is one of our community's most important cultural institutions – not only for the high caliber of its performances, but also because of its unwavering commitment to education," says Mark Nerenhausen, president and CEO of the Broward Center. "We look forward to many more great things ahead." ★

- Leon M. Rubin is editorial director of Cultural Quarterly.