

Robert Franz

Idaho Statesman

The Boise Philharmonic's Robert Franz finds a home in Boise

By Dana Oland
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You wouldn't think that an orchestra conductor and aeronautical engineers would have a connection. But the exploits and genius of Wilbur and Orville Wright are an endless well of inspiration for Boise Philharmonic Music Director Robert Franz.

"I'm enamored with how specific, smart and tenacious they were," he says. "For years, I had a picture of the first flight in my office. For me, the message is don't give up, work hard and set the standard. I try to do that with the orchestra and in my personal life."

Franz brings dynamic energy, a honed musical sensibility and a wacky sense of humor to this position. He engages his audience with lighthearted banter from the stage that makes even the most complex works accessible. And he is known for pulling a few fun stunts, such as changing into a Superman costume in an on-stage phone booth to conduct Michael Daugherty's "The Red Cape Tango," or playing baseball during a performance of "Casey at the Bat."

He juggles two other musical groups across the continent: the Windsor Symphony in Windsor,

Ontario, which is a chamber orchestra, and the Houston Symphony, where he is an associate conductor who runs its Family Concert Series. He also leads a chamber group at the Fairbanks Summer Arts Festival in Alaska each July.

With all that travel, Boise is the place he loves to come home to, he says.

"When I came here I knew it would be a great place to work, but I didn't know it would be such a great place to live," he says. "People are so nice, and they care about each other and the community here."



In Houston, Robert Franz conducts that orchestra's family series. At last season's "Star Wars and More," he dressed as Obi-Wan Kenobi, then squared off against Darth Vader while the musicians played John Williams' score.

Credit: Michelle Watson / Catchlight Gro

From Idaho, Franz has earned a national reputation as one of the best musical conductors in the business, not just because of his musical abilities, but because of his generosity of spirit that fosters an open approach to creativity in the conservative world of classical orchestras.

"I want the musicians to feel like they can express themselves," he says. "These musicians have such a hunger for growth — artistically and professionally. I think we feel like it's not just an

orchestra where you can do that; Boise is a city where it can happen.”

It’s not just something he says, it’s what he does everyday, says violist and Serenata Orchestra music director Jennifer Drake.

“Most orchestras have an acrimonious or adversarial relationship with the music director,” she says. “That’s what is so unique about Robert. He’s such a talented leader that we do feel like we’re all on the this trip together. And he’s so passionate about community outreach and engagement. He’s just so willing to share his love of classical music with anyone at any time.”

As a result, Boise enjoys a thriving classical music scene beyond the Philharmonic main stage. Groups have popped up under the leadership of orchestra players, such as Classical Revolution, a loose association of musicians that plays in alternative venues led by violist Lindsay Bohl and English horn player Lindsay Edwards; Chimera Duo, Edwards’ and harpist Matthew Tutsky’s side project; and Drake’s Serenata.

There also is a group that focuses on new classical musical: 208 Ensemble was co-founded by Cello Collective founder Jake Saunders and incorporates several philharmonic players and Boise State professors. Saunders, who grew up in Boise, returned to earn his master’s degree through a collaboration between Boise State and the Boise Philharmonic to establish a string quartet at the university.

Franz champions collaborations like this and those between his neighboring arts groups, such as Opera Idaho, Ballet Idaho, Boise Contemporary Theater and Idaho Shakespeare Festival. He has expanded the orchestra’s reach into area schools and community orchestras through his side-by-side rehearsal initiative. For that, he embeds his 17 principal players into a youth or community orchestra to act as models, coaches and inspirations, while Franz works that group’s material from the podium.

“It’s so fun to watch my colleagues interact with community players and talk shop,” he says. “This

kind of outreach and bridge building is so important for our growth because it extends the dialogue about music beyond the stage.”

He plans to do it again this season with the Boise Philharmonic Youth Orchestra, Serenata and the Meridian Symphony.

Franz grew up in the rolling hills of rural North Carolina, not far from Kitty Hawk, the site of Wilbur and Orville’s first successful flight. When he was 8, his music teacher, Willa Loescher, who is the great-grand niece of Orville Wright, gave him a cello to play. Franz never looked back.

“She is the reason I’m in music,” he says. “From that moment, I knew that’s what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. We’re still very good friends,” he says.

After seven years in Boise, he hasn’t gotten the itch to leave. Just the opposite. He’s dug deeper into the community, remodeling two houses he owns — his other passion is breaking down walls and creating new spaces — and settling down with his family. Now, at 50, Franz is ready to take things to the next level and tackle the tough questions, he says.

So, what’s the tough question?

It’s not what to do with my hands or how I rehearse an orchestra. It’s how I relate to other people. I’ve become aware that being successful at my job depends on my relationships with the people around me. I’d like to be better at being more empathetic and open. It’s not just all about what I want, though it was when I was younger. That’s a hard lesson to learn in life. It’s about the directions you go when you’re interacting with others.

Is that the challenge that comes with heading three groups?

Yes, because you’re working with three different staffs, different boards and groups of musicians. Each has a different way of being, and they’re each dynamic systems that are always changing. I’m the through line. It’s difficult to balance being true to your own course with being flexible to fit into these changing cultures.

How are the three orchestras similar?

Lots of collaborations. I make a huge effort to try and join forces that you might not expect to join. And I think all three groups are responsive to the audience, whether the audience is 50 or 10.

Who or what inspires you?

My family. At the end of the day they help me remember what this is all really about. Going home is a bottomless well of love, acceptance and inspiration. I'm lucky to have them.

In all of history, whom would you most like to dine with?

The Wright Brothers, of course. I just finished reading David McCullough's new book. I think I might enjoy chatting with Orville more, but I think Wilbur would have been incredibly inspiring.

What's the hardest lesson you've had to learn?

Patience. My natural tendency is to identify an issue, formulate a solution and implement. What I am still learning is that this process doesn't always allow space for the myriad of beliefs and thoughts that others bring to the table. I have a little reminder that I write at the top of my notes in a meeting. "Think, then speak." It puts a moment in between the two so I can leave space for the unexpected to occur.

What are you looking forward to in the upcoming Boise Phil season?

I'm excited to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the (Boise Philharmonic Master Chorale). I have a special connection with them. So, I'm performing with three of their four concerts. Our opening night is Italian opera choruses (some of the best from Verdi, Mendelssohn and Borodin), then we have the Holiday Pops, which is always fun, and then I'm going to do my first Mozart Requiem, and I'm super excited about that.

I'm also looking forward to working with Spencer Myer again (pianist) and Jennifer Frautschi (violinist). Ever since I heard Spencer play, I've wanted to do the Beethoven Fourth (piano concerto). He's got the right personality for it, and Jennifer was here a few years ago and did the

Korngold. Now she's back to do the Brahms, which is a real masterpiece.

Where do you most like to take out-of-town guests?

I often take them to my neighborhood pub, the 13th Street Pub and Grill (1520 N. 13th St.). When we travel and stay in hotels, most of us long for a slice of "everyday life." Living in the North End is one of my great joys, and I love to share that with my friends and colleagues.

If you weren't a conductor, what would you be doing?

Perhaps I'd be a lawyer. I love to argue — and win! I also could imagine a life somehow attached to real estate. Even though I just bought a house, I still love to look at what's on the market and imagine the possibilities.

What is your motto?

Have the courage to go into the unknown. Don't predict what's going to happen next. Be in the moment.

What is your theme song?

"Let It Go" from "Frozen." I mean, really, who doesn't need to be reminded of that on a daily basis!

What is in your Mp3 player?

"La Mer" by Debussy. I was listening to it while on the beach on vacation recently.

What is the secret to your success?

Be aware. Am I still growing? Has my environment changed? Is the amount of effort worth the potential outcome? I constantly ask myself these questions and hopefully, through awareness, I am able to continue to grow and develop as an artist, as a leader and ultimately as a human being.

We are all on our own path, and how we treat others along the way goes a long way in determining how successful we are.

What is your guilty pleasure?

Well, how guilty would I be if I divulged that here?