

## Conductor David Stahl marks 25 years with the Charleston Symphony Orchestra

By Adam Parker  
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**Wade Spees/The Post and Courier**

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David Stahl celebrates his 25th year as music director of the Charleston Symphony Orchestra this year. Watch footage of concerts, hear interviews with past and present orchestra members and hear what David thinks of the quarter century of symphony in Charleston. [Watch »](#)

At the Charleston Symphony Orchestra League membership tea last week, David Stahl stood in the living room of Aline Smith's house on East Battery and gave a long speech.

He was grateful for the support of volunteers, without whom the orchestra would have nothing, he said. He recalled climbing the steps of this house for the first time in 1982, with his then-toddler, Sonya, in tow. He talked about how music nourishes the soul, how communities thrive thanks in part to the arts, how so much has changed in Charleston during the past 25 years.

He set the stage for Saturday night, opening night of the season, when the orchestra would play Prokofiev's "Alexander Nevsky" cantata and Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture" with chorus, two Russian works about the tragedy and triumph of war. For tickets, see [www.charlestonsymphony.com](http://www.charlestonsymphony.com).

Stahl is an enthusiastic and inexhaustible advocate of great music and of a local enterprise that continues, after a quarter-century of ups and downs, to inspire him — and to inspire him to inspire others.

Stahl, who at 59 has reached a silver milestone in his career, remains full of fire and hope, continuing his effort to secure the orchestra's place in the city's cultural landscape. But nothing, he says, should be taken for granted.

### **In the beginning**

In 1981, he made an appearance at the Spoleto Festival, conducting three one-act operas at the Dock Street Theatre.

"I liked the feeling I had," he says. "I saw the potential. This city was too important an American city to have only 17 days of a high level of quality in terms of the arts."

In 1977, Mayor Joe Riley helped initiate the renaissance of the Holy City by helping to establish the Spoleto Festival and its regional component, Piccolo Spoleto. Riley says he wanted to reinvigorate the arts in Charleston, which were languishing. Supporting the festival and the local symphony were two essential ways to do that, he says. A city alive with the arts would draw business people and professionals, who would, in turn, ensure that the arts remain alive, Riley says.

The orchestra, which had 13 full-time musicians at the time, was looking for a new music director in the early 1980s when Stahl auditioned.

Ellen Dressler Moryl, Charleston's director of cultural affairs, and J. Barry Goldsmith, a retired educator and current member of the symphony's board, were on the search committee. Twenty-five years later, their choice has proven to be a wise one, they say.

"I think the community thinks of David as an icon," Goldsmith says. "He brings excitement."  
"David has charisma and then some," Moryl says.

"It's hard to overstate David's importance to our community over the last 25 years," Riley says.  
Little by little, Stahl built the orchestra, challenged its musicians to think big and cultivated a warm European sound.

But he also has grown with the community.

In the late 1980s, Stahl sent 5-year-old daughter Sonya to the Ashley River Creative Arts Elementary School. He was concerned about Sonya's education. He often went to see her teacher, Karen. He asked pointed questions. He opened file cabinets to scrutinize their contents. He counted supplies.

Separated from his first wife, he turned up often to talk with Karen about Sonya. "She's brilliant," Karen would say, a bit dismayed by this parent's oppressive concern. "She's doing fine."  
"By the 12th visit, I'm thinking maybe his interest goes beyond just Sonya," Karen says.  
Then the precocious kindergartner made her move.

"Could you do some research," she asked her teacher, using her advanced vocabulary, "and find out if you could go out?"

In February 1989, they married. In September, he was back from a gig in Spoleto, Italy, rehearsing Camille Saint-Saens' Organ Symphony. Karen was five months pregnant with their son, Byron.

Then Hurricane Hugo smashed into the Lowcountry. At about 12:30 a.m. Sept. 22, a big oak tree ripped loose from the ground and split their West Ashley home in two, landing directly on their bed.

It was official: The conductor from New York, protege of Leonard Bernstein, and his wife, the educator from Winston-Salem, N.C., had become Charlestonians.

### **The main thing**

Tacy Edwards wears two hats. She is president of the League Volunteer Corps and a 15-year veteran flutist in the orchestra. And she is among the orchestra's strongest advocates. She says Stahl is "demanding but kind."

Some conductors are prone to temper tantrums, arrogance or cruelty, she says, such as George Szell of the Cleveland Orchestra during the 1940s and 1950s, who famously fired musicians on the spot for playing badly.

Stahl is just as determined to build a great orchestra — and orchestra sound — but his manner is nothing like Szell's, she says. If he doesn't like what he hears, he delivers a "silent message" with a glance, then starts the music again, she says.

The players appreciate the varied repertoire, too, she says. "We don't play a lot of the same stuff over and over."

Concertmaster Yuriy Bekker joined the orchestra in January 2007. Bekker has worked under many conductors and sometimes found himself in profound disagreements over musical choices. But that hasn't happened with Stahl, he says.

"He listens to others. He wants other people's ideas. He's a team member."

Bekker points out that Stahl, who has been musical director of the symphony for a third of the institution's life, has evolved along with the rest of the musicians. He has established a Charleston style and tradition.

"From my perspective, David is a wonderful musician, a great leader with a broad knowledge of the repertoire, both operatic and symphonic," Bekker says.

### **The other main thing**

The Volunteer Corps is the biggest donor to the symphony. Last season, it raised \$355,000. Volunteers work hard, doing for the symphony what paid staffers do for symphonies elsewhere, Edwards says.

The city delivers about \$150,000 derived from the accommodations tax. The symphony qualifies for the money by demonstrating that it stimulates tourism, Moryl says.

Ted Legasey, symphony president and chairman of the board, said the organization functions with a \$3 million annual budget, half of which comes from gifts and sponsorship. About 40 percent is generated through ticket sales, services and other earned income; 10 percent comes from grants.

"It's tough to get people to understand the annual nature of funding," he says.

The symphony is trying to counter the perception that its regular fundraising efforts are needed because of bad management, he says. It is the nature of a local arts organization to ask for support year after year. "The key is to try to elevate this enterprise so it's sustainable long term," Legasey says.

In a way, the symphony has become a victim of its success. Under Stahl's musical leadership, the orchestra now supports 46 full-time musicians, a big number compared with other markets the same size. Expectations are high, too. World-class musicians produce a world-class sound. And the Charleston Symphony is full of world-class players. They come to Charleston via the highly competitive audition circuit.

Paying for all this talent — and the guest musicians, special events, community outreach and administration — is particularly difficult when there are no Fortune 500 corporations in town or major endowments, Legasey says.

Stahl always has been ambitious, striving to build an orchestra that can play the really big pieces, but ambition comes with a hefty price tag.

### **Priorities**

In 1997, Klaus Schultz of Munich's Staatstheater am Gaertnerplatz hired Stahl to serve as its music director and chief conductor. The appointment came after a triumphant concert performance of Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess," which combined American singers with German instrumentalists and thrilled audiences.

"In Europe, they treat (music) like sport," Stahl says.

Schultz wanted Stahl full time, but the conductor said no. He would not give up his permanent residence in the Lowcountry. A year later, they struck a compromise.

His work abroad helps keep him energized and inspired, he says. European musicians and audiences are "so in touch with the legacy of the profession."

They're aware that when they attend a concert at the Musikhalle in Hamburg, for example, they are sitting in the same theater where Brahms himself once presented his work.

This legacy is absorbed by Stahl when he is abroad, then brought back to Charleston and shared. In Europe, he notes, music and other forms of artistic expression are an intrinsic part of the culture and are supported by the state. In America, the arts and the state must make a deliberate effort to forge relationships.

Yet, Stahl insists, a great orchestra improves the quality of life, which, in turn, stimulates tourism and economic development.

## **At home**

Sitting in their sunlit kitchen overlooking the Stono River, the Stahls reflect on their years in Charleston.

Karen remembers how, a decade ago, after being diagnosed with breast cancer, she asked her husband to mount a performance of Puccini's "Madame Butterfly," her favorite opera. It took about four years of effort, but Stahl arranged it.

Today, she is cancer-free.

David Stahl, a note of gratitude in his voice, describes how his wife holds down the fort when he is away. She counters, saying he never has lost sight of what's really important: family. When he's in Germany, he calls home constantly. He blocks out dates so he can attend volleyball matches, graduations, birthdays. The family always spends three weeks together there each summer. "The family becomes so incredibly close," Karen says. "The children become each other's best friends."

Byron, 18, attends the College of Charleston's Honors College. Daughter Anna, 14, is captain of her high school volleyball team. Sonya, now 27, plays the violin and works for a fruit distribution company in Florida.

Stahl calls his home his "sanctuary." His other home is on the conductor's podium, where he can elicit glorious music from dedicated musicians with a flick of the baton, where he can delight in the act of spontaneous creation, where something as intangible as sound can provoke human sorrow and joy.

He remembers certain musical moments — the heartbreaking "Liebestod" of "Tristan und Isolde," the grandiosity of the Berlioz Requiem, the synchronicity of the Jets in "West Side Story" — and how these moments captivated audiences and moved his own soul. He understands, better than most, how music illuminates the human experience.