

Aubrey Bergauer is

Shaking up the Symphony



How a millennial who believes in both Mozart and metrics saved the California Symphony, redefining the classical concert experience as we know it.

By **Laura Fraser** | Photography by **The Morrisons**





MOST SYMPHONY performances begin with a hush, followed by a smattering of polite applause as the conductor takes the podium. Not at the California Symphony. Before a recent concert, executive director Aubrey Bergauer strode on stage in a stylish black dress and mauve velvet heels and warmly welcomed the audience, sprinkling in a few words of Spanish. She encouraged people to bring drinks to their seats. She told them they could clap whenever they wanted. And she said it was OK to use phones on silent. Many of the patrons filling the nearly sold-out house in the Bay Area fit the typical classical concertgoer mold—gray hair, dark suits, understated jewelry—but there were plenty of fresh faces, too. The all-ages crowd dressed in everything from business-casual button-downs to hoodies, the uniform of Bay Area tech tycoons. Anyone who might have worried they'd be out of place could breathe easy.

In recent years, the 76-piece orchestra based in Walnut Creek—a suburb 25 miles east of San Francisco—has undergone a makeover, stepped up its outreach to younger music fans, diversified its organization to reflect the demographics of the surrounding community, and strengthened its bottom line. When Bergauer arrived in 2014, the symphony was on the brink of financial collapse. Now, ticket sales have increased by 70 percent, concerts are frequently added to keep up with the demand, and the number of donors has nearly quadrupled.

As orchestras around the country deal with aging audiences and search for ways to stay relevant—with midsize symphonies facing greater financial challenges than their big-city, big-donor



counterparts—the California Symphony has succeeded by taking bold risks without compromising its musical integrity. *The Mercury News of San Jose*, sizing up performance groups in the area, said the orchestra may be the “most forward-looking music organization around.”

Behind it all is 36-year-old Bergauer, a fast-talking, blog-writing, numbers-wielding marketing maestro who knows millennials because she is one herself.

“My goal is to change the narrative for orchestras. It’s beyond one organization,” Bergauer says. “It’s about how we replicate success elsewhere, and I feel like everything I’ve done is replicable. I don’t think anything is specific to this market or to this community.”

PHOTOGRAPHY BY THE MORRISONS

To grow the symphony’s audience, Bergauer sought feedback on even the smallest details of the concert experience (right).

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ART GARCIA; ICONS BY NATALIE PEREZ

HITTING THE RIGHT NOTES

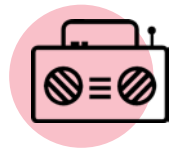
These four symphonies took a chance on imaginative programming and it’s paying off.



Seattle Symphony

▷ **THE TWIST:** This symphony boasts a dynamic duo: Untuxed is an informal, short presentation of classical compositions—think Beethoven and Brahms—performed by musicians in blue jeans, while Untitled is an unapologetically avant-garde late-night event with a focus on contemporary works.

▷ **BRAVO:** Search YouTube for the orchestra’s collaboration with rapper Sir Mix-A-Lot. Their rendition of “Baby Got Back” has nearly 7 million views.



San Francisco Symphony

▷ **THE TWIST:** Sound-Box is an immersive spectacle with no assigned seats and an eclectic lineup. The techy venue, which features multiple stages and 85 loudspeakers, can be customized to the piece. For example, music harkening back to the Middle Ages will sound much like it did when it was originally performed in a European Gothic cathedral.

▷ **BRAVO:** Mingle with the musicians over craft beer and cocktails.



ROCO

▷ **THE TWIST** This Houston-based symphony has performed pieces inspired by everything from miniature trains to a 19th-century Turkish wrestler and isn’t afraid to mix up the traditional format. One event, Musical Chairs, took audience members downtown where they meandered through historic homes while enjoying different ensembles.

▷ **BRAVO:** The ROCO app delivers program notes in real time.



Detroit Symphony Orchestra

▷ **THE TWIST** The DSO has a history of innovation: In 1922, it became the first orchestra heard on the radio, and, for the past 40-plus years, its Classical Roots program has celebrated African-American artists. More recently, it began Musical Feasts, an intimate dinner party series held in patrons’ homes.

▷ **BRAVO:** Tune in to one of the symphony’s free webcasts.

—By Tommie Ethington



BEFORE TAKING the reins as executive director, Bergauer was aware of some of the challenges facing orchestras, having spent time in development and marketing at the Seattle Opera and at Bumbershoot, a music and arts festival in Seattle. Though the California Symphony would be her biggest undertaking yet, she saw potential in the great artistic product, a nationally recognized composer residency, and a rising star conductor who would be her partner. Directing a symphony also represented a dream.

A Houston native, Bergauer got her start in classical music as a student. She’d hoped to play saxophone in the middle school band, but, full up on saxes, the band director lugged out the tuba instead. “I had to sit on telephone books to reach the mouthpiece,” Bergauer recalls. Still, she loved music and excelled at it, playing in the Houston Youth Symphony and performing at Carnegie Hall. It wasn’t until the HYS changed executive directors, when she was 16, that she found her true calling.

“It was a lightbulb moment,” she says. “Sitting in the back of the orchestra, I realized it was someone’s job to organize this whole thing, and that was the job I wanted.” From that point on, she studied music and business in tandem, remaining laser-focused on leading an orchestra of her own.

When the California Symphony came knocking, Bergauer says, “I warned them I was going to do things differently.” Unlike many orchestras that try to appeal to younger audiences (in the symphony world, “younger” means “under 60”), Bergauer and Donato Cabrera, the California Symphony’s music director and conductor, didn’t start with the premise that there was something wrong with the music itself.

“People think that to bring in younger audiences you need ‘The Symphony Meets the Beatles,’ but a Beethoven symphony is amazing to anyone. You don’t have to ‘symphonize’ pop music,” Cabrera says. “We needed to change the experience, not the repertoire.”

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Bergauer tested this hypothesis by creating a survey project to collect information on the symphony experience. She called it Orchestra X, a nod to Google's experimental research arm in Silicon Valley, and invited culturally minded millennials and Gen Xers to \$5 concerts in exchange for their honest feedback. Their findings indicated that, indeed, only one person thought the music itself was the problem. The rest were in awe.

Then for the pain points: Respondents said the symphony's website felt like insider baseball, and that you needed a Ph.D. to understand the technical descriptions of the music. "No one ever defines that a 'concerto' means 'a soloist with the orchestra,'" Bergauer says. "We're a Twitter culture, and our program notes sounded like they were written by musicologists." Instead, concertgoers wanted the dish on composers' lives. They wanted to know how long the show was going to

last, and what the music was going to sound like. They also wanted to bring drinks to their seats, not swig them like shots during intermission. "Overall, they wanted the symphony to be more approachable, more *fun*," she says.

Bergauer and her 17-person team set to work transforming the orchestra's straitlaced image. Now, the website announces, "This isn't your grandma's orchestra," and a "Symphony 101" FAQ advises people to dress up or down as they please, to feel free to snap a selfie, and to clap whenever they hear something they enjoy. "The taboo about clapping between movements is a strange 20th-century invention," Cabrera says. "Composers used to expect people to clap, and if they didn't, they thought the piece was a failure."

Within each online program description, there's a bulleted list giving context about the concert. Facts like, "It's unclear whether Mozart ever got to hear his

Symphony No. 39 performed," pair with a blog post on Mozart movie myths and Instagram-worthy photos of concertmaster Jennifer Cho farming in Petaluma, California. An embedded Spotify playlist provides a concert preview, which Cabrera builds on with a free, hour-long talk before each show.

The response has been overwhelmingly positive. "We had one patron who felt the new 'clap when you want' policy was ridiculous," Bergauer says, "but so many others, including musicians and long-time patrons, say, 'I look around the hall and see it's packed now when it used to be half empty. I see there are younger people here and I feel a different energy than I've ever felt before.'"

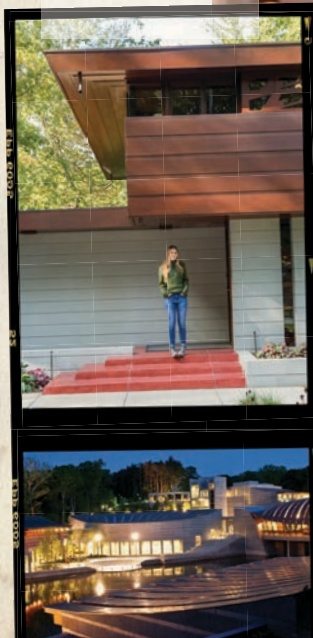
But, as Bergauer is quick to point out, it's not just what you say; it's how you deliver the message. Rather than bombard concertgoers with calls, emails, and direct mail, Bergauer subscribes to a "long-haul method" for audience

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development. This means that first-timers, for example, get a letter on their seats with a discount for their next concert. They won't find a hard sell for a donation or automatically be signed up for the newsletter or receive a plea to become a season ticketholder.

This level of restraint is uncommon—even risky by some standards—given that nationally 90 percent of first-time symphony attendees don't return within a year. But a more measured approach has saved the symphony money in the short term and increased revenue in the long run.

"With labor-intensive artistic experiences, costs are always on the rise, but this is one area where we were able to save by being disciplined with who we're communicating with," Bergauer says. "When I'm talking with others in the field, the question I always get is, 'Isn't that a lot of work?' The answer is it's different work, but it's worth it because the revenue has followed."

People outside the organization have taken note. "She's recognized that, as a field, we tend to be ritualistic about how we do things ... and how we've operated behind a sort of veil," says Jesse Rosen, president and CEO of the League of American Orchestras. "She's focused on the quality of the experience, beginning with how an orchestra comes across online, and worked to make it more in line with contemporary audiences. She's a gifted leader, and is getting good results."

THE COMMUNITY Bergauer has created is one of the more diverse in the orchestra world, carefully cultivated with a message of inclusiveness and better outreach. "Most orchestras, when they want to have a more diverse audience, do a Dia de Los Muertos concert or a Chinese New Year concert," Bergauer says. "They draw crowds like a movie concert draws millennials, but then it goes back to the way it was."

Latinos make up 25 percent

of the California Symphony's surrounding community but accounted for less than 3 percent of the symphony's audience. So last season, Bergauer had the symphony's digital ads translated into Spanish. That marketing tweak led to a 50 percent increase in the number of Latino households that make up the symphony audience.

Bergauer then received a grant to translate the symphony's website and program notes into Spanish. Another grant allowed for a dual-language adult education program. Every little win has motivated Bergauer's team to keep pushing. "One day, somebody messaged us on Facebook in Spanish wanting to buy tickets," she says. "We're in the office, calling the person who does translations for us to make sure to write the person back appropriately, and it was this little flurry of recognition, like, 'Oh, this is working. We have to figure out how to sustain this.'"

The symphony has also committed to more diversity among the board, administrative staff, and musicians. "It's important that audiences see people on stage and off who look like them—in terms of gender, ethnicity, orientation, and age," Bergauer says. Whereas nationally only 2 percent of programming is by female composers or composers of color, 20 percent of the California Symphony's programming each season is created by living composers, female composers, or composers of color.

And, for the first time in the orchestra's history, the symphony's composer-in-residence is a woman. Bergauer insisted on blind auditions to eliminate unconscious bias, and the selection committee picked 27-year-old Katherine Balch, a Yale-educated, experimental composer. The symphony also opened the 2018-19 season with a piece by Grammy Award-winning Latina composer Gabriela Lena Frank.

"There are so many little things we've done differently to address that problem or this need,"



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Bergauer says. “Altogether, we are defying the trends of this industry.”

The proof is in new concertgoers like Kelsey Blegen, a 31-year-old attorney. She and her husband attended two performances before becoming subscribers. And while Blegen typically prefers the more conventional concerts, a recent holiday performance ranked among her favorites. It included a mix of traditional carols, a sing-along, and a live soundtrack of the animated movie *The Snowman*, which was projected over the stage.

“The conductor would give a small intro to certain pieces and ask you to listen for a specific sound or something that he found unique about the piece,” she says. “That was helpful and kept you engaged.” Other highlights included festive drinks, like mulled wine, and an “instrument petting zoo” for kids and kids at heart. “They’ve done a great job of creating an experience,” Blegen says.

Mike Elmore, a 43-year-old CEO of an engineering company, agrees. At one point, he didn’t realize there was a symphony in Walnut Creek, but now he never misses a concert when he’s in town. “They take the stuffy edge out of the symphony,” he says. “The marketing makes it look exciting and moving, and it’s fun, with Aubrey and Donato opening the symphony, excited to have people there.”

Elmore became a subscriber and donor, partly to be sure he got a good seat. “It’s getting to the point where they’re sold out fast.”

But it’s not just about filling seats. Bergauer and her team are building a future. “The most obvious difference in the audience between when Aubrey [started] and today is that we have one,” Cabrera says. “We’ve gone from meager attendance to being sold out, with people feeling engaged and part of this family we’ve created.”

Laura Fraser is a San Francisco-based writer. Email her at laura@laurafraser.com.