

DSO bassist changes path

Detroit Free Press - Detroit, Mich.

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Date: Sep 7, 2011

Start Page: D.1

Section: Life

Text Word Count: 471

Document Text

FREE PRESS MUSIC WRITER

Bassist Rick Robinson has always been a trailblazer and entrepreneur.

He was just the second African-American musician in the Detroit Symphony Orchestra when he joined in 1989. Since the '90s he has spread his wings as the founder of CutTime Productions, an umbrella for his activities as a chamber musician, concert presenter, composer, arranger, publisher, lecturer and advocate for broadening the audience for classical music.

Now Robinson, 48, is aiming higher. He's taking a one-year leave of absence from the DSO beginning in January to devote himself full time to CutTime initiatives. He's pursuing concerts and residencies with orchestras, music schools and others nationwide, as well as expanding his footprint in Detroit.

For Robinson, who has seen audiences for classical music diminish in size and diversity during his career, it's about securing the future.

"We need to do more talking to audiences. We need to make classical music more intimate," he said. "I'm trying to open the hearts and minds of people and show that this music is not just for old white people."

Robinson's CutTime Players (octet), and CutTime Simfonica (string ensemble) specialize in informal presentations of a wide range of repertoire, from his arrangements of classical standards to original works that blend a neo-romantic classical style with soul, blues and jazz.

Robinson's decision to step away from the DSO comes at a time of turmoil in the industry. Many symphonies are struggling with deficits, aging audiences and labor unrest. There are also heated debates over evolving job descriptions for classical musicians.

While bitterness over the DSO's recent six-month strike led to the departure of some of Robinson's colleagues, his own decision to seek a leave was inspired by his personal and professional trajectory. He won a prestigious Kresge Artist Fellowship in 2010, and the \$25,000 award allowed him to invest in marketing materials, recordings and other facets of his business.

His father died last spring, and Robinson has increasingly come to side with those who believe classical music is in crisis. "I'd be doing this even if it weren't for the strike," he said.

Robinson might or might not return to the DSO. He said the decision will depend on his ability to secure professional management and enough work to replace his income and benefits.

Both Robinson and DSO management said they were talking about ways the orchestra could present CutTime ensembles next year under the terms of the new contract that sets aside money for outreach and chamber activities. The Simfonica represents the DSO twice this fall -- on Saturday afternoon at the Grosse Pointe Block Party and Nov. 6 at the Virgil H. Carr Cultural Arts Center in Detroit.

"We see Rick as an example of the possibilities," said DSO executive vice president Paul Hogle.

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