

The Plains Are Alive WITH THE SOUND OF SYMPHONY MUSIC

By Gwen Hoberg

When North Dakotans consider the music scene in their state, the symphony orchestra may not be the first type that pops into their heads.

Yet, North Dakota has more formally organized orchestras per capita than its neighbor states of South Dakota, Montana, and Minnesota, as well as Wyoming. "When I tell people from other states about the number of orchestras we have, they are really surprised," says Jan Webb, executive director of the North Dakota Council on the Arts.

The eight formally organized orchestras in North Dakota, in order of their founding, are the Greater Grand Forks Symphony (1905), the Minot Symphony

Orchestra (1926), the Fargo-Moorhead Symphony (1931), the Bismarck-Mandan Symphony (1976), the Devils Lake Community Orchestra (1980), the Valley City Civic Orchestra (1997), the Heartland Civic Orchestra of Rugby (1999), and the Missouri Valley Chamber Orchestra of Bismarck (2000). In addition to these ensembles, Jamestown College has a chamber orchestra with a strong community presence, and string players in Williston can join Williston State College students to play in its string ensemble.

Although North Dakota's orchestras are for the most part based in its largest cities, many players live in rural areas of the state and travel to perform in one



The Bismarck-Mandan Symphony performs at the Belle Mehus Auditorium.

or more of the orchestras. While the Valley City and Heartland orchestras use players primarily from Valley City and Rugby, they have also drawn members from towns as far as 50 miles away. The Minot Symphony is able to engage military personnel as well as musicians who travel from other North Dakota cities.

Margaret Blickensderfer, violinist and assistant concertmaster in the Bismarck-Mandan Symphony, has commuted from Mott for the past 35 years at 200 miles per round-trip. She has endured her share of severe weather for the sake of the orchestra, such as the time she and her family “spent a few hours in a roadside latrine waiting for a blizzard to subside.”

Curtis Peacock, the conductor of the Missouri Valley Chamber Orchestra, has also experienced firsthand how “you’re at the mercy of the elements in the Dakotas.” For several years, Peacock traveled from Casper, Wyoming, to Bismarck for rehearsals and concerts, and he now commutes from Rapid City,



The Missouri Valley Chamber Orchestra takes a bow following a performance in Bismarck.

South Dakota. He once missed all of the rehearsals for a concert because of a blizzard, spending three nights stranded in his car. He made it to the performance, however, and the audience gave the orchestra a standing ovation.

On the other hand, some of North Dakota’s orchestras try to limit the number of players they import from afar in order to give local musicians enough



of an opportunity to perform. "We've tried to keep a local flavor to the group," says Russell Pearson, conductor of the Devils Lake Community Orchestra. At times it becomes a tricky balancing act for ensembles that want to have the highest quality musicians, whether or not they are residents of the community in which the orchestra is located. Yet they do not want to deprive residents of the chance to play, or develop an ensemble that does not really represent their region.

In addition to their regular season concerts, several of North Dakota's orchestras provide a fine arts element to holiday celebrations in their communities. Thousands of North Dakotans look forward to the Bismarck-Mandan Symphony's free Fourth of July concert on the State Capitol mall each year, an event that "helps us maintain connections in the community," says Jeff Collier of the Symphony. In December the Fargo-Moorhead Symphony offers both a full orchestra holiday pops concert and a brass chamber music concert. The Grand Forks, Heartland, and Bismarck-Mandan orchestras also

have winter holiday concerts.

Fundraisers are another opportunity for orchestras to offer special occasions in their areas, many of which are the sole events of their kind. The Missouri Valley Chamber Orchestra once did a fundraiser with a Regency Ball theme, with the Northern Plains Ballet giving dance lessons. Says Paulette Dailey of the Mi-



Bernard Rubenstein directs the Fargo-Moorhead Symphony.





Rugby's Heartland Civic and String Orchestras draws musicians of all ages.

not Symphony, "Every year the Minot Symphony League puts on a Secret Garden tour, usually with five gardens. That's been a good fundraiser for us." The Minot Symphony has also been a beneficiary of Minot's Great Tomato Festival, an annual fundraising event that includes a silent auction.

For several years the Bismarck-Mandan Symphony hosted fundraising New Year galas, complete with big band dancing and champagne toasts. In March 2010, it reversed roles and participated in the national Orchestras Feeding America program, run by the League of American Orchestras. The symphony donated more than 750 pounds of food to local food banks.

THE SYMPHONY MUSIC MAKERS

BISMARCK-MANDAN SYMPHONY

Dr. Beverly Everett, music director
www.bismarckmandansymphony.org
 701-258-8345

Fun Fact: Dr. Everett dreams of one day conducting Copeland's Appalachian Spring to an audience atop Sentinel Butte in western North Dakota.

DEVILS LAKE COMMUNITY ORCHESTRA

Russell Pearson, conductor
 701-662-8353

Fun Fact: Since its founding, the DLCO has provided thousands of dollars of equipment to the high school music program.

FARGO-MOORHEAD SYMPHONY

Bernard Rubenstein, music director
www.fmsymphony.org
 218-233-8397

Fun Fact: In its 2010-2011 season the FMSO partnered with restaurants to offer special dinner menus corresponding with the different countries featured in its Masterworks concerts.

GREATER GRAND FORKS SYMPHONY

Grand Forks
 Alexander Platt, music director
www.ggfso.org
 701-732-0579

Fun Fact: The GGFSO sponsors five different youth programs for student musicians in the region.

HEARTLAND CIVIC ORCHESTRA AND HEARTLAND STRING ORCHESTRA

Rugby
 Tilman Hovland and Deb Jenkins, conductors
 701-776-2348 or 701-776-6839

Fun Fact: Rugby is one of the smallest cities in the United States with an orchestra.

MINOT SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Minot
 Dr. Dennis Simons, conductor
www.minotstateu.edu/symphony/
 701-858-4228

Fun Fact: Minot is the smallest city in the U.S. sustaining a full-sized orchestra with paid musicians and bylaws.

MISSOURI VALLEY CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

Bismarck
 Curtis Peacock, conductor
www.mvco.net
 701-426-9536

Fun Fact: The MVCO was founded by musicians, and musicians pick the music, which is an unusual arrangement for orchestras.

VALLEY CITY CIVIC ORCHESTRA

Dr. James Adams, director
 701-845-7269

Fun Fact: Valley City State University students have the opportunity to serve as conducting interns with the orchestra.



The Heartland Civic Orchestra's brass section prepares for a concert.

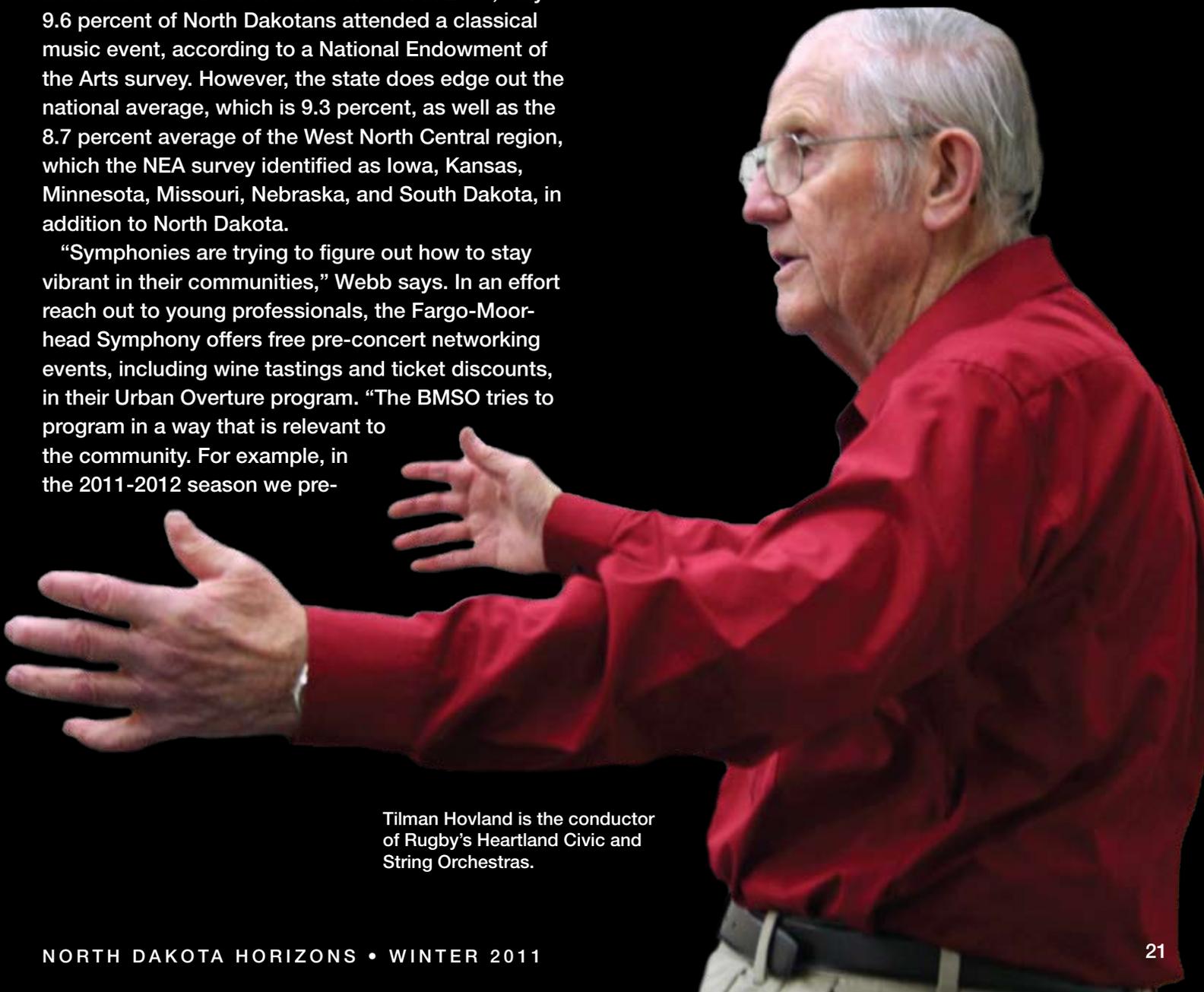
Despite the faithful support of many North Dakotans for their local orchestras, there is undoubtedly room to grow in the percentage of the state's population that attends orchestra concerts. In 2008, only 9.6 percent of North Dakotans attended a classical music event, according to a National Endowment of the Arts survey. However, the state does edge out the national average, which is 9.3 percent, as well as the 8.7 percent average of the West North Central region, which the NEA survey identified as Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, and South Dakota, in addition to North Dakota.

"Symphonies are trying to figure out how to stay vibrant in their communities," Webb says. In an effort reach out to young professionals, the Fargo-Moorhead Symphony offers free pre-concert networking events, including wine tastings and ticket discounts, in their Urban Overture program. "The BMSO tries to program in a way that is relevant to the community. For example, in the 2011-2012 season we pre-

miered a work by Chris Brubeck, the son of jazz musician Dave Brubeck, telling the story of Theodore Roosevelt and the Dakota Badlands," says Collier.

It remains to be seen whether North Dakota will be able to maintain so many orchestras in the coming years. Meanwhile, residents of the state can be proud of the dedication and artistry offered by these ensembles. And the best way they can show their pride, musicians and personnel of the orchestras would undoubtedly argue, is by taking in the music firsthand at a concert.

Gwendolyn Hoberg is a Bismarck native who has played french horn in orchestras in North Dakota, Minnesota, and other states since junior high. She is currently pursuing a master of arts in English at the University of Minnesota - Duluth. She can be reached at ghoberg@gmail.com.



Tilman Hovland is the conductor of Rugby's Heartland Civic and String Orchestras.