

FIRST CHAIR

THREE NEW PRINCIPALS JOIN THE ST. LOUIS SYMPHONY.

BY EDDIE SILVA



DILIP VISHWANAT

Allegra Lilly

In September 2013, the St. Louis Symphony welcomed three new principal players to the ensemble: Allegra Lilly, harp; Karin Bliznik, trumpet; Shannon Wood, timpani. A principal position is a home for the ambitious. Principals are leaders and accept the challenges, the responsibilities, and the glories of playing the stand-out parts nearly every week. They are exposed, and need to shine in that exposure. They become part of the signature of an

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orchestra's sound. The predecessors to the three new hires—Frances Tietov, Susan Slaughter, and Richard Holmes—contributed to defining the sound and character of the St. Louis Symphony, through their musicianship and leadership, for four decades. No pressure.

Such an immediate shift in principal personnel is rare, and its effects are apparent, both on stage and off stage, to the audience and to the orchestra.

Playbill asked the new principals to share their thoughts about their new orchestra, and their drive to win that first chair—the challenges and joys of the position.

Allegra Lilly

“Before I came here I had heard that I would find the nicest people I’d ever want to meet. What I found were the nicest people ever assembled in one place, in terms of both artistry and personality. I had worked with David Robertson before, with Ensemble ACJW in New York. He’s warm, wonderful, and inspiring. I love how much information he has and shares about composers.

“Is a principal position something I’ve always wanted? Yeah. Although at first I just wanted to play the harp. I played in the Detroit Symphony Orchestra Civic Orchestra, a great local group, and with the Metropolitan Youth Symphony, in metro Detroit. Somewhere, somehow, something clicked into place. Before I won the position here I was freelancing, living in New York and playing with the New York Philharmonic and Boston Symphony.

“Playing principal is the best of all worlds—a lot of solo moments, and

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—ALLEGRA LILLY

it’s usually an important solo. I work with wonderful colleagues on a repertoire that is immense. I was always struggling to find challenging recital programs to play, but the harp parts in an orchestra are exceptional. All it takes is one time playing Mahler 5 and you’re hooked.

“There are moments when I’m confronted with a big, difficult part and I wish I had a section, but that’s also what makes it exciting. What drew me to the harp is its unique position in the orchestra. I love that about it. That’s what makes it really difficult—and scary.

“I value the collaboration with my colleagues. The harp has the most

intimate chamber moments in the middle of great works—the chamber experience and the full orchestra are combined into one thing.”

Karin Bliznik

“When I was at the Royal College of Music, in London, they had a Hollywood show. I think they figured they’d give the American the first part. That was the first time I played principal on every piece. I did a lot of John Williams and old movie soundtracks, even 20th-century fanfares. I’ll never forget that.



Karin Bliznik

The more you do it, your confidence builds. You get a taste for it.

“When you play associate, it’s actually harder because you move around so much and have to play so many different roles. As principal you have the solo voice. You make the decisions.

“In terms of leadership, what I love about our section is that I have so much respect for my colleagues, as they do for each other. I’m always asking ‘Is that right for you?’ I lead by listening, so I’m never confronted with a big conflict. It brings peace of mind.

“The camaraderie of the orchestra is outstanding. You can hear it in performance. It’s special. I’ve been to more parties with musicians here than anywhere else I’ve been. No one has stopped complementing me. It’s very welcoming to know your music-making

is appreciated by everyone. It lets you be yourself to the fullest. You feel like you’re doing the right thing. You don’t have to question yourself.”

Shannon Wood

“I officially started here in September, but I had the opportunity to play with the orchestra after Rick [Holmes, former Principal Timpani] had passed away. I received an invitation and was offered a couple of weeks. Those two weeks, I was amazed at how well everyone played. You felt a sense of integrity from the first day of rehearsal, the warmth of personality and char-

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Shannon Wood

acter.

“I’d always been on the fence between drum set, percussion, and timpani. I started on drum set, then gravitated toward timpani in middle school and high school. As an undergrad I had a good grounding in percussion, and in grad school as well with a fair amount of timpani.

“It all clicked for me after I set percussion aside. When I was at New World Symphony I’d play timpani when the timpanist was gone for a week. For a while I still did percussion auditions, and then I only took timpani auditions. And then I won principal at the Florida Philharmonic.

“I love the low sonorities of the timpani. I like how timpani interact with the orchestra. You’re always involved. As I matured I could see how Beethoven used timpani as a third trumpet, and I could work to make it sound that way. I like being part of other sections. I play with the woodwinds, the strings, the brass.

“Timpani are instruments you can play louder than anybody else and make yourself known—but you need *not* to do that. You need to blend.

“But there’s also no way you can hide. Everything you do is exposed. You’re the most visible musician on the stage. If there is a big thump, they know it’s you. But you also get to play really cool parts.”

Eddie Silva is the External Affairs and Publications Manager for the St. Louis Symphony.