

MUSIC YOU KNOW

THE ST. LOUIS SYMPHONY INTRODUCES
A NEW CONCERT SERIES IN NOVEMBER.

BY EDDIE SILVA



David Robertson

DILIP VISHWANAT

David Robertson understands that there are obstacles that keep people from attending an orchestral concert. Included among these obstacles is a natural resistance to the unknown: “I don’t know it, it’s not for me.” There is the stress factor as well: “How do I dress? How do I behave?” and the ever-present dilemma, “When do I clap?”

Although in the 10 seasons Robertson has served as music director of the St. Louis Symphony he has tried to be the most welcoming concert host, even gratefully acknowledging applause between movements, the formalities of the orchestral concert still impede many people from fully enjoying the core of what the Symphony does. “It has to do with the formal nature of concert-going, where there seem to be rules of etiquette,” says Robertson. “The conductor comes out and turns his back on the audience, Miles Davis-like, rather than being

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enthusiastic. People have commented on how speedily I head to the podium. It's because I am so excited to get to the music."

The stress factor is a troubling situation for the orchestra business, in St. Louis and elsewhere, especially so, since in Robertson's mind, this stress factor is the opposite of what the music is about. "The formality of the orchestral experience turns into stiffness, which has nothing to do with the music," Robertson observes. "The Symphony plays some of the most supple and agile music ever written. We can all loosen up and relax in the company of music. Let's have fun with it. Music You Know concerts are putting that enjoyment front and center."

The first Music You Know concert is performed November 21 at Powell Hall. The program includes Mussorgsky's *Night on Bald Mountain* (you know, like in Disney's *Fantasia*), selections from Grieg's *Peer Gynt* (you know, the butter commercial, Robertson says, "Cue the sunrise...cue the cows... This butter tastes great!"), and Copland's Four Dance Episodes from *Rodeo* (you know, "Beef. It's what's for dinner.")

It's a concert series true to its name. "This is 'encore' material," says Robertson. "You want to hear it again."

Like most "new" ideas, it's an old idea that is coming around again. "These are much more like 'sampler' programs that orchestras used to perform," Robertson explains. "Each one of the pieces is a real gem in and of itself. It's how concerts were programmed in the recent past, providing the laugh-out-loud joy music can bring."

The Music You Know series also includes *Musicians You Know*. Musicians from the St. Louis Symphony perform solos on each concert, among the 50 Symphony musicians performing solos throughout Robertson's 10th-anniversary season. In November, violinist Dana Edson Myers plays Tchaikovsky's *Marche slave* (you'll know it when you hear it). Also in November is a work you don't know, but from a composer you know as a longtime Symphony musician. Violist Christian Woehr has been writing his own compositions for many years, and this season one of his works receives a St. Louis Symphony premiere, with his friend Becky Boyer Hall on solo violin.

The March Music You Know features folk dances, with two of the Symphony's three Romanian violinists performing as soloists, Eva Kozma and Silvian Iticovici. Kozma plays Ravel's popular French gypsy dance, *Tzigane*, and Iticovici plays Bartók's *Rhapsody No. 1*. Robertson calls this a "geographically adventurous" program, with some cross-cultural effects. "Borodin's *Polovtsian Dances*," Robertson says, "sounds like Shaker melodies."

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The third and final Music You Know concert of the 2014-15 season, in May, could be called Music You Know Best. Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man*, Vaughan Williams *Fantasia on "Greensleeves,"* Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2* (you know, it's in a Bugs Bunny cartoon), and Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance March No. 1* (you know, they probably played it over and over during your high school graduation ceremony). Robertson emphasizes that a live orchestra, especially one of the quality of the St. Louis Symphony, disassociates *Pomp and Circumstance* from its "broken record" status. "Hearing it live you realize the true beauty of what Elgar conceived," Robertson says.

Cellist Alvin McCall is the Symphony soloist on this program, performing MacDowell's *Romanze*. Also on the program is Ives's *Variations on "America."* Here's a song you know by heart, with Ives's marvelous gift for re-invention transforming it into a series of songs that are bold and fresh.

The Music You Know series is accommodating to modern audiences. Robertson likens these "sampler" programs to the shifting American palate. "All the restaurants served a three-course meal with a big slab of meat or fish in the middle of it. But now we go to restaurants and try tapas from the Iberian peninsula—each one with exquisite tastes that make you want more."

The series also recognizes the place of orchestral music in everyday experience. The music selected for these programs is heard in film, TV, advertising, and on the internet. A trip to Powell Hall is not a journey into the unknown.

There is a conversation that occurred between popular American composer George Gershwin and Second Viennese School composer Alban Berg in the early 20th century. Gershwin greatly admired Berg, but was reticent about playing his music for him. Gershwin was a Tin Pan Alley song plugger, after all, a writer of show tunes, at least in his own mind.

Berg eased his new American friend's anxiety, "Mr. Gershwin," Berg said, "music is music."

Music You Know seeks to assure audiences in the same way. As Robertson says, "This music is a part of all music."

It's music, you know?

The first Music You Know concert, Night on Bald Mountain, will be performed at 8 p.m., Friday, November 21, at Powell Hall.

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