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Bravo! Vail Valley Music Festival



Anne-Marie McDermott is Bravo! Vail Valley Music Festival's new artistic director. Provided by Bravo! Vail Valley Music Festival

Refreshing shakeup on the horizon

By Kyle MacMillan
Denver Post Fine Arts Critic

By the numbers, things have been going well for the Bravo! Vail Valley Music Festival — attendance has held steady despite the economic downturn, and it finished the 2010 fiscal year in the black.

But the 24-year-old summer classical series — which features residencies by the New York Philharmonic and two other major orchestras, as well as chamber music — had grown a little artistically listless in recent seasons.

It was time for a change, and that change begins today.

Although she has been working behind the scenes since October, Anne-Marie McDermott, the festival's new artistic director, steps publicly into her new role for the first time with a free one-hour recital at 6 p.m. today.

McDermott, 46, a nationally known pianist who plans to be a frequent presence on stage as part of her job, replaces flutist Eugenia Zukerman, who stepped down at the end of last summer after 13 seasons in the position.

While she has nothing but praise for her predecessor, whose accomplishments included helping lure the Philharmonic to Vail, McDermott makes clear that she is intent on re-energizing the festival and putting her stamp on it.

"I'm not coming in trying to do what she did," McDermott said. "I want to do things differently, and that's absolutely no criticism of her. I just think it's good for the festival."

But don't expect wholesale changes — at least any time soon. She wants to keep the basic format of the festival the same for now but add more audience-friendly extras such

VAIL: Audience-friendly projects planned

Five not-to-miss concerts

Wednesday, Dallas Symphony. Jaap van Zweden, the orchestra's well-regarded music director, leads an all-Beethoven program that includes the composer's "Triple Concerto" with violist Ida Kavafian, cellist Peter Wiley and pianist Anne-Marie McDermott.

July 14, mezzo-soprano Theodora Hanslowe, tenor Zach Borichevsky and members of the Philadelphia Orchestra. Gustav Mahler's meditative song cycle on life and death, "Das Lied von der Erde," will be performed in an increasingly popular reduced version for 13 instruments.

July 19, Gabriel Kahane, and July 20, Kahane and yMusic. Kahane, an innovative cross-genre vocalist and pianist, is the festival's composer-in-residence this summer. He will perform varied back-to-back programs in two separate settings.

July 26, Edgar Meyer, double bass, and Chris Thile, mandolin. These two artists, both supreme exponents of their instruments, have made careers of blurring musical boundaries, especially that between classical and folk.

July 27, New York Philharmonic, violinist Gil Shaham. Shaham continues his exploration of well-known and not so well-known violin concertos from the 1930s with a performance of William Walton's rarely heard contribution to the form. 877-812-5700 or vailmusicfestival.org.

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as lectures, discussions and perhaps even a film series. She envisions, for example, a symposium around a theme such as music and the brain.

"I just think it would be enriching," she said, "to have a series of talks on related issues but veer a little bit outside the strict confines of classical music, just to help keep creating a really stimulating environment at the festival."

This season, the most noticeable transformation comes in the festival's chamber-music offerings — small groups, such as trios and quartets. They had become almost afterthoughts because of the attention on Vail's higher-profile orchestral residencies.

"I'm just hoping somehow to get a buzz created with that area of the festival," she said.

Concerts doubled

McDermott doubled the number of concerts on the festival's main chamber series from four last year to eight this summer, and she tried to find repertoire that would grab listeners' attention, such as a reduced version of Gustav Mahler's revered song cycle, "Das Lied von der Erde (Song of the Earth)."

Most of the performers for that concert will come from the Philadelphia Orchestra — one of McDermott's attempts to link the chamber series more closely with the festival's orchestral offerings.

She also wants the festival to do a better job of inter-relating repertoire between the orchestral and chamber programs. This season, works by Mahler and Ludwig van Beethoven thread between the two series.

In addition, the festival has renamed its chamber-music series, "Big Music for Little Bands" — a title conceived by Jackie Taylor, the festival's new artistic administrator,



Anne-Marie McDermott, a nationally known pianist, plans to be a frequent presence onstage in Vail. *Jean Lehman*

who has been working closely with McDermott.

"For some reason, the word, 'chamber music,' doesn't attract people," McDermott said. "I don't understand why, but I'm aware that it doesn't really. We wanted a title where people wouldn't know exactly what it was, and they would read further."

The new artistic director promises more changes in future seasons. Among them might be adding a chamber orchestra to the festival's mix.

"There's a whole wealth of chamber-orchestra repertoire that the public is not getting a chance to hear, so that is something down the line that I'd like to see happen," she said.

But at this point, McDermott said, that is just an idea. She is nowhere near ready to say whether a chamber-orchestra

would replace one of the large orchestras or be an enlargement of the festival's lineup.

"I'm really excited," she said, "about looking at lots of different ideas for the future with the festival, and, obviously, things take time. You can't make changes instantaneously, so I did what I felt that I could do in this first year."

McDermott will arrive in Vail just in time for her concert today and stay for the festival's entire run through Aug. 3. To help attendees get to know her, she plans to speak before every concert.

"It's kind of my personality," she said. "I want to make it a little more casual and a little more fun."

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ANNE-MARIE MCDERMOTT, PIANO. Classical music. Gerald R. Ford Amphitheater, Vail. McDermott publicly begins her tenure as music director of the Bravo! Vail Valley Music Festival with a one-hour piano recital. The event launches this year's edition of the summer series, which runs through Aug. 3. Free. 877-812-5700 or vailmusicfestival.org