

Portsmouth native Paul Van Anglen debuts the Newport Contemporary Music Series

By Keith Powers / Special to The Journal

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Not Portsmouth native Paul Van Anglen.

For his first Newport Contemporary Music Series, opening at Rogers High School on July 1, the 25-year-old not only needed to build an orchestra from scratch, he had to find players willing to tackle some of the most challenging contemporary repertory anywhere.

"I just wanted to create the best programs I could," the composer and conductor says. "I have about a million programs that I want to do.

"In terms of contemporary music, there really was not much going on in Newport on the orchestral level," Van Anglen says. "Most of this music is unfamiliar, and I thought it was best to build an orchestra that had the time to delve into it, rather than contracting another one."

Van Anglen started taking piano lessons at age 5, also played trumpet and French horn, and was a member of the Portsmouth High School marching band until he graduated in 2010.

It was a visit to the Boston Pops that set him on the path to a career in music. "I went to a Boston Pops concert with John Williams when I was 8, and I was hooked on music ever since." That connection obviously stuck, as Van Anglen has programmed an entire concert of Williams' compositions during the series.

After high school, his studies in Rennes, France, and later in Paris clarified Van Anglen's musical tastes, and added the extensive



French connections that show up in the repertory and the performers during the series. Van Anglen lives in Paris but returns to Aquidneck Island for the summer.



“I went to Rennes for conservatory studies in composition, conducting and analysis, and later studied in Paris,” he says. “The music I’ve studied in France is more popular here than abroad, and that’s one of the reasons I’ve been working so hard on the music series.”

During the process of recruiting his orchestra, Van Anglen met violinist Harris Shilakowsky, who will serve as concertmaster for the ensemble. Shilakowsky used his own experience forming the Bristol Chamber Orchestra in Massachusetts — “I was conductor, librarian, personnel manager” — to work with students and union musicians to make the series come together.

“We posted on message boards, creating an application and audition process,” Shilakowsky says. “But I knew that soliciting college students wouldn’t produce all the musicians we would need. So I also developed a relationship with the Boston and Providence chapters of the American Federation of Musicians, and encouraged Paul to make it a requirement that musicians be in good standing with AFM.

“This assures us a pool of serious professionals,” Shilakowsky says. “They are more likely to contribute their artistic best. Our roster includes 114 musicians, who will perform on one of our concerts or another.”

It’s a lot of players, but they’ll be needed. The repertory starts hard and stays that way throughout the series.

On opening night, there’ll be a world premiere by André Previn, “Almost an Overture,” along with music by Gérard Pesson and two more familiar contemporary works, Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue” and Copland’s “Appalachian Spring.”

Van Anglen attended a concert of Previn’s music at Tanglewood, in the Berkshires, the summer home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. He happened to see the Oscar-winning composer on the grounds and struck up a conversation, then later contacted his secretary to ask about contributing to the Newport series.

A chamber music matinee July 2 at St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church in Jamestown tackles a new work by Pesson, more music by Copland and Previn, and compositions by Elliott Carter and Van Anglen himself.

Pierre Boulez’s electronic work “Répons,” staged with soloists from the International Contemporary Ensemble, based in New York City, highlights a July 15 concert at Portsmouth High School. “Because of the nature of the electronics we had to move it there,” van Anglen says.

Composer Howard Shore, best known for his “Lord of the Rings” soundtrack, comes to Newport July 28 for a concert of his music, along with the music of Alban Berg and Frank Zappa.

Violinist Solenne Païdassi gives a recital Aug. 5, film composers dominate the Aug. 10 program, and a tribute to John Williams concludes the season Aug. 12.

Van Anglen did not want to divulge his budget until the season is over. But he has incorporated Newport Contemporary Arts as a Rhode Island nonprofit and raised money from private donors. He hopes to hold some fundraisers this summer to raise money for next year. The goal of the series, according to its website, is to introduce a younger generation to new, varied musical styles, creating a long-term festival with extensive community outreach programs.

“I remember Beethoven said, ‘It’s a pity a musician also has to be a businessman,’ ” Van Anglen says. “It was a massive undertaking. Harris put together the budget based on the number of musicians and how much they had to travel, and I tried to be as prudent as possible spending the money.

“Of course, fundraising was extremely difficult,” he says. “The organizations that would normally give large sponsorships will not do so without a previous track record. But through a lot of work, just seeking people out and asking them, getting many no’s and finally some positive response, I was able to put this together,” he says.

“I’ve spent years researching the backstage workings of big festivals,” Van Anglen says, “talking with friends who are conductors, seeing how it works.”

As Shilakowsky points out, there is a decidedly practical side to staging a concert. “As personnel manager I need to read the score, decide what instruments we need, and how many, and compute the costs of producing performances. We need to work within the budgets. That way we can chart a direction, and assure our growth for many years to come.”

— *Keith Powers covers music and the arts for the GateHouse papers and WBUR’s The ARTery. On Twitter at [@PowersKeith](https://twitter.com/PowersKeith).*

What: Newport Contemporary Music Series

When: July 1 to Aug. 12

Where: Rogers High School, Newport; Portsmouth High School, and St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church in Jamestown.

Tickets: \$10 to \$65

Information: (401) 829-7593, ncmsri.org

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