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Nothing beats 'Otello,' conductor says

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Conductor Robert Spano was "over the moon" when he received the offer to conduct Verdi's "Otello" for Cincinnati Opera.

"It doesn't get better than this," says the conductor, who leads Saturday's performance. "I think what's so astounding about the score is, in every moment, you're thinking, 'This is my favorite moment.' And then the next moment comes, and another moment comes."

The Ohio-born conductor, who will soon start his 10th season as music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, may be better known more for his symphonic programs of American music than for his work in opera pits. But Spano, 49, is also an accomplished operatic maestro, who has worked with the companies of Chicago, Houston, Seattle, Santa Fe and many others.

He has conducted French, Italian and lots of Mozart operas. But this is his first "Otello."

Spano was born in Northern Ohio, but moved to Elkhart, Ind., at age 2, where his father, a clarinetist, made flutes. Robert, who played flute, piano and violin in elementary school, made his conducting debut at age 14, leading the Elkhart Symphony in his own composition.

His first experience in the opera pit was at Bowling Green University. He was right out of the Curtis Institute of Music, where he studied conducting with Max Rudolf, former music director of the Cincinnati Symphony.

During his Atlanta tenure, his innovative ideas, such as a semi-staged "Dr. Atomic" by John Adams, have been a hit.

But Spano has made his biggest mark in his commitment to new music - the heart of his musical life, he says. His concerts and recordings regularly feature music by Jennifer Higdon, Christopher Theofanidis, Michael Gandolfi, Osvaldo Golijov and soon, Adam Schoenberg.

The group of composers has become known as "The Atlanta School." But Spano says he also presents music by many other Americans, such as John Adams, John Corigliano, David Del Tredici, Ned Rorem and Alvin Singleton. Soon, they'll release an album that includes Singleton's "PraiseMaker," commissioned by the Cincinnati May Festival.

His adventuresome programming has attracted national attention, and at home, it has engaged a growing audience. Even though Spano hears from concertgoers who prefer more Tchaikovsky and Beethoven, the orchestra's projected ticket sales go up by 5 to 15 percent when they play new music, he says.

"The tactic we took was to develop relationships over time with a few composers so the audience got to know them," Spano says.

And, despite the demise of Telarc, the Atlanta Symphony has continued recording, hiring the former Telarc team. Spano's 12 recordings, for Telarc and Deutsche Grammophon, have won six Grammy Awards.

Yet, like every American orchestra, Atlanta was hit hard by the recession. A magnificent Atlanta Symphony Center, to have been designed by Santiago Calatrava, has been put on hold.

"We decided it was core mission to continue recording the composers we commission. It's not really a tradeoff, but we were meant to go to Carnegie Hall twice next year and we cancelled one of those engagements," he says.

The orchestra continues to expand its reach. In summer, it plays in a two-year-old, 13,000-seat outdoor amphitheatre, the Verizon Center. In its first season, 65 percent of those attending Spano's classical concerts had never been to a symphony concert.

Spano is optimistic about the future of orchestras and opera companies and finds the challenges exhilarating.

"Our culture is in a massive shift as people access their information and entertainment and their leisure time differently," he says. "We need to figure out how we sustain and promote a thriving musical culture in this new world that is being created."

He doesn't believe that interest in classical music is waning, as some say.

"If you look at what's being downloaded, purchased, performed and studied, it's more than ever," he says.