Berkeley Symphony

Biography

Berkeley Symphony is unique among Bay Area and American orchestras for its commitment to innovation, community, and excellence. Founded in 1971 in the intellectual and artistic nexus of Berkeley, California, the Orchestra is committed to premiering and commissioning new music and championing female composers, sustained by the supportive musical environment of Berkeley, the East Bay, and the San Francisco Bay Area. From the outset, the people behind Berkeley Symphony’s culture and programming were attuned to the culturally diverse people and the heady creative climate of their home city.

Thomas Rarick, a protégé of the great English maestro Sir Adrian Boult, founded the orchestra in 1971 as the Berkeley Promenade Orchestra. Reflecting the spirit of the times, musicians performed in street dress and at unusual locations such as the University Art Museum. When Kent Nagano became the music director of the orchestra in 1978, he charted a new course by offering innovative programming that included rarely performed 20th-century works and numerous premieres. The renamed Berkeley Symphony Orchestra gained an international reputation for its adventurous programming, and became known for premiering the music of international composers and showcasing young local talents. Berkeley Symphony entered a new era in January 2009 when Joana Carneiro became the Orchestra’s third Music Director in its 40-year history. Under Carneiro, the Orchestra continued its tradition of presenting the cutting edge of classical music for nine seasons. In 2016, Berkeley Symphony and composer Anna Clyne were awarded a Music Alive grant for a three-year composer residency, designed to immerse Clyne and the Symphony in the creation of new work, collaboration with other Berkeley arts institutions, music education, community outreach and multidisciplinary activities.

Berkeley Symphony has introduced Bay Area audiences to works by upcoming young composers, many of whom have since achieved international prominence. Celebrated British composer George Benjamin, who subsequently became Composer-in-Residence at the San Francisco Symphony, was first introduced to the Bay Area in 1987 when Berkeley Symphony performed his compositions *Jubilation* and *Ringed by the Flat Horizon*; as was Thomas Adès, whose opera *Powder Her Face* was debuted by the Orchestra in a concert version in 1997 before it was fully staged in New York City, London and Chicago.