Meet incoming orchestra CEO Michelle Miller Burns: 'The Minnesota model really resonates with me'

Incoming CEO Michelle Miller Burns vows to continue open, collaborative leadership at Minnesota Orchestra.

By Jenna Ross Star Tribune

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Michelle Miller Burns began playing the violin at age 4, after seeing on TV in her Iowa basement a young soloist perform with the Boston Pops Orchestra. She doesn’t remember the piece, but she remembers the girl. The violinist was wearing patent leather shoes and a baby-blue dress with a crinoline underneath, so it poofed out.

“I went to bed that night and said to my mom, ‘When am I going to start playing that thing?’” Burns said. “She didn’t think much of it. ... Later, she mentioned it to my dad. Evidently I brought it up several times.”

So her parents rented her a little violin.

Thus began Burns’ musical career, one that would eventually shift from performance to administration. In April, the Minnesota Orchestra announced that Burns, 49, would become its next president and CEO — the second woman to hold that role in the organization’s history. The Iowa native starts in September, succeeding Kevin Smith, who came out of retirement to become president and CEO in 2014 and is credited with rebuilding the state’s largest performing arts organization after a 15-month lockout that the New York Times described as a “near-death experience.”

In announcing their pick, which was unanimous, orchestra leaders praised Burns’ work with the Dallas Symphony, where she was chief operating officer and executive vice president for institutional advancement. They also admired her open, collaborative style.
We caught up with Burns at Orchestra Hall in July, as she prepared to embark with the Minnesota Orchestra on its five-city tour of South Africa Aug. 7-19.

Q: Playing the violin when you were young, did you have a favorite composer or piece?

A: There’s a piece that is not particularly well known or often played but for some reason my teacher in Chicago liked it, so I played it hundreds of times: The Lalo “Symphonie Espagnole.”

It’s very emotionally charged. Which is funny thinking about playing it at such a young age when I had no sense of the context. … It’s romantic, it’s fiery, it’s beautiful. It has some technical challenges. It’s just fun to play.

Q: Do you play, still?

A: On very rare occasions, I will bring the violin out just for me.

My dad, in addition to his full-time work, also was the music director of a church in Waterloo for many, many, many years. Because I had that “in” with the music director I was often called in to play Christmas Eve service or Easter Sunday.

The last time I played in public was two years ago at Easter — which happened to be his last Easter before he retired. I suspected he might be thinking about retiring so even though I was completely out of shape … I decided that I’d do it.

And I’m really glad I did. It was fun to be able to play one more time with the choir while he was conducting.

Q: How does Minnesota measure up in terms of classical music and the arts?

A: Artistically, Minnesota is just extraordinary. There are so many talented musicians, and with Osmo [Vänskä]’s artistic leadership, I just think that the orchestra sounds fabulous. That was important to me in the interview process, to make sure I heard a concert live. It’s different being in the hall and experiencing the reaction of people in the audience. To see: What is that connection between the audience and the orchestra? Is there one?

I found there to be a very strong connection here.

One thing that was attractive to me is the fact that the orchestra is part of a community that so embraces the arts and culture. It’s one thing to be an orchestra in a city where you’re the big game in town. It’s another thing to be an orchestra in a city that has such diverse cultural opportunities.

Q: How can orchestras in general — and this orchestra in particular — balance the needs of traditional audiences while attracting new ones?

A: It’s like you said, balance. The balance of innovation and tradition. Because you certainly want to make sure that our traditional audiences and patrons who have grown up accustomed to a certain type
of performance and format don’t feel like that has been abandoned, because it is so much a part of
what the orchestra is. It is the orchestra’s rich tradition.

One of the things I’m excited to see here, is to go to some performances firsthand that are not on the
classical series. What does that audience look like, how are they engaging with the programming? I
have every reason to believe that the things that are going on here are successful.

But let’s take a look at what that is. Are there other program formats that could be explored — again
without stepping away from that tradition?

Q: What will your role be in terms of shaping programming?

A: Certainly, I start with the knowledge that the artistic programming is something that Osmo as the
music director has the vision for and we honor that vision. It’s also my understanding from speaking
with Osmo that he is very willing to think beyond the traditional. Certainly keeping artistic quality top
of mind but also thinking: How can we innovate a little bit? How can we present something in a
different way that might broaden our audience or attract patrons to the orchestra?

In looking at the 2018-19 season, we see the focus on American composers, which is really cool.
Within that, I see things you would expect to see, some of the Copland, Bernstein. But there are other
things that are maybe a little less known. ...

There is that desire here to work collaboratively in all areas. Artistic programming is indeed one of
those areas that involves more than one or two people. And our musicians are involved in that process.

Q: How about in terms of female composers, composers of color? How might you push the orchestra
to include more voices?

A: Certainly, it’s important to make sure there are those opportunities for people who represent all
sorts of different constituencies to have the opportunity to be on the podium or to compose pieces that
will be performed by the orchestra, or to be guest artist on the stage. That’s something that is, in the
field, very much a mandate to move forward.

Q: What questions did you get over and over again during the interview process? What themes
emerged?

A: One of the reasons I was engaged here is because the “Minnesota model” really resonates with me.
It’s very reflective of my own management and leadership style.

When I started the conversations here, that was so attractive to me. To think that musicians and board
members and staff would be a part of conversation and thoughtful decision-making was really
appealing. I think that it’s fair to say that the constituents at the Minnesota Orchestra want to make
sure that model continues. That strikes me as one of the priorities.
Q: The musicians’ contract is set to expire in 2020. What will you do to ensure those negotiations go well?

A: I was just using that word “conversation,” and that strikes me as an appropriate way to describe what that process will look like. There will be a series of conversations. It won’t be a super-structured thing [where] we start on this date, end on this date, make it a really tight time horizon so there’s a lot of stress. That’s a typical but perhaps, hopefully, outdated model.

Here, because of the wonderful groundwork that has been put in place in recent years around collaboration, we can approach this as a series of conversations.

Q: What has inspired you lately? It could be music, or art or anything.

A: I was just so moved by Vijay Gupta, the violinist with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. He started Street Symphony, and has been working with the community of Skid Row, which is not very far from the Disney Concert Hall there in L.A.

He gave a very powerful speech and it’s something that we should all take a look at from time to time. He talks about … what it is to really be a part of a community, not just inviting members of a community into your hall — but actually taking your organization, musicians, staff into a community and partnering with that community. Rather than just saying, “We’re going to play some nice traditional music for you in our hall. Please come.”

That is very much in the rearview mirror of how orchestras are thinking.

And I think that’s really exciting because it suggests to me that there are so many ways we can partner with other organizations, particularly in the Twin Cities, where there are so many wonderful arts and culture organizations, but also social service organizations. I’m really looking forward to exploring that when I get on board here. How can we connect with a variety of different organizations and services to better be a part of the community?

Not to serve the community — but to be a part of the community.