

Gagnon concert combines voice with symphony orchestra

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The world premiere of a new work — “Francesca Gagnon, The Voice of Alegria sings the music of ‘Cirque du Soleil’” — will highlight the UF Symphony Orchestra’s opening concert of its centennial season on Friday at the Phillips Center.

Francesca Gagnon will sing songs from Cirque du Soleil in the world-premiere of “The Voice of Alegria” with the UF Symphony Orchestra at the Phillips Center on Friday.

Francesca Gagnon

What: Acclaimed vocalist performs the world-premiere of “The Voice of Alegria” with the UF Symphony Orchestra.

When: 7:30 p.m. Friday

Where: Phillips Center, 315 Hull Road, Gainesville

Tickets: \$30-\$40.

Info: 392-2787 or <http://www.performingarts.ufl.edu>.

The new work draws from the music of a number of “Cirque du Soleil” productions and will feature Gagnon, one of Cirque’s best-known vocalists, in a performance that will make up the concert’s second half.

“Francesca Gagnon is one of the central voices in the musical and theatrical world today,” said Michael Blachly, director of UF Performing Arts and co-commissioner of the work.

“‘Voice of Alegria’ is a great project, combining voice with a symphony orchestra. I am real excited for the UF Symphony Orchestra to be at the front of this production,” Blachly said.

The performance comes after three years of planning and underscores Gagnon’s acclaimed performances in “Alegria,” a Cirque du Soleil production she joined in 1994.

Singing for “Alegria” was “a very special experience,” Gagnon said in a telephone interview.

Originally from northern Quebec, Canada, Gagnon performs as the featured vocal soloist in the popular “Alegria,” the soundtrack from which is the best-selling of all “Cirque du Soleil” recordings.

“I did not realize the success of Alegria until the tour,” Gagnon said. “The show touches everybody, young and old, and it has a great message of hope and love.”

For Gagnon, a recording artist who crosses cultural boundaries in her music — her new CD “Meridiano” is a collaboration with the Chilean folk group Inti-Illimani — bringing the sound of “Cirque du Soleil”

to the concert hall seemed natural. “I would like to perform this music with a symphony orchestra,” the singer recalled thinking. “It was a dream to do so.”

John Luckacovic of 2Luck Productions, the California-based entity that co-commissioned the work with Blachly, said the new piece “crosses so many lines,” from classical to contemporary.

“This is a terrific project in so many ways,” Luckacovic said from Santa Monica, Calif.

Gagnon describes the piece as a mixture of different cultures and as a new way to hear the music without the acrobatics of the “Cirque du Soleil production.”

The work will feature Gagnon’s vocals in music from such Cirque productions as “Cortéo,” “Quidam,” “Kà,” and the film “Journey of Man” along with “Alegria.” The 10-part orchestral collage required some creative arranging since much of the music to “Cirque du Soleil” employs electronic media to create the rhythmic drive.

“We had to translate this to acoustic instruments,” Benoit Groulx, music director for “Voice of Alegria” as well as a composer/arranger of scores for such films as “Steel Toes,” “An American Haunting,” “Attila” and “A Sound of Thunder.” The team of arrangers of “Voice of Alegria” converted the hip-hop style, which is an integral part of the soundtrack to a number of “Cirque du Soleil” shows, into other styles in order to suit the orchestration, Groulx said.

The first half of Friday’s concert will showcase the UF Symphony Orchestra in two works: Respighi’s “Feste Romane” and Philip Glass’s “Concerto for Saxophone Quartet and Orchestra.” Respighi’s four-part symphonic poem of 1929, with its colorful orchestration and mosaic-like structure, recalls the grandeur of Rome.

“Who could argue that this is the perfect showcase to show off the University of Florida Symphony Orchestra in this celebratory year,” Raymond Chobaz, conductor of the UF Symphony Orchestra, wrote of the piece in his program notes.

Glass’s “Concerto For Saxophone Quartet and Orchestra,” written in the mid 1990s, meanwhile, is one of the composer’s most popular concertos. It also offers listeners the sound of saxophone, a timbre not often employed in symphonic repertoire.

“People love the saxophone,” said UF music professor and concert saxophonist Jonathan Helton, who added that the Belgian instrument maker Adolphe Sax originally designed the saxophone for orchestral use.

Glass’s four-movement concerto will feature the new Onyx Saxophone Quartet, comprised of saxophonists from around North Central Florida, in its premiere concerto performance. “The writing for the saxophones is good,” Helton, a member of Onyx, said of Glass’s concerto. “The harmonies are close and this gives us a powerful sound.”

From its original membership of eight musicians in 1911, the UF Symphony Orchestra has now grown into an orchestra of more than 100 musicians. And Friday’s pieces, including the “Voice of Alegria,” will be fitting works for the symphony to perform as it begins its 100th year.

“We cover the whole gamut from Baroque to modern every season,” Chobaz, conductor of the UF Symphony Orchestra said. “We should be open to trying new things.”