

Mountain and Sea: Tacoma Arts Organizations Unite For Climate Awareness

Summary

Symphony Tacoma, the Museum of Glass (MOG) and Hilltop Artists are collaborating with Mount Rainier National Park (MRNP) in a project culminating with the Symphony's 2016-2017 Season Finale on May 13, 2017. In commemoration of the Centennial of the National Parks System, the multi-layered project will engage area residents in music and glass art and raise awareness of the plight of Mount Rainier's glaciers, which are melting at an alarming rate.

Introduction

For the residents of Pierce County, Mt. Rainier is a silent sentinel, always present on the horizon and guarding life in the South Sound area. However, this mountain that is an iconic part of Northwest culture, art and life needs residents to guard its future—and the local arts community has taken up the call. In 2015, scientists released a sobering report warning of the rapid recession of the mountain's glaciers—the largest on a single peak anywhere in the contiguous United States—due to climate change, and the ecological consequences that will soon follow. The geography of the region, with its mountains and valleys intertwined with the many-fingered Salish Sea, is unique in the world. Here, mountain and inland ocean interact in ways not seen elsewhere, and the accelerating retreat of the glaciers is already resulting in unforeseen consequences.

Impressed by the fragile beauty of the region, Sarah Ioannides—new to South Puget Sound since her 2014 appointment as Music Director of Symphony Tacoma—envisioned a powerful collaboration between the Symphony, MOG, Mount Rainier National Park and the Hilltop Artists: one that will engage and inform the Tacoma area community.

The resulting effort—titled *Mountain and Sea*—will be comprised of events and activities that could only take place with these particular regional organizations. Participating artists will be empowered to create art that reflects these values, bringing together their diverse core patronage while engaging the community at large.

Mountain and Sea will feature performance glass art at MOG created between students from Hilltop Artists and the museum's renowned glass blowers. Families, friends and neighbors will all be able to come see them during March's free Third Thursday at MOG. They will be joined in the hot shop cone by members of Symphony Tacoma, who will perform both composed and improvisational music as they accompany the fluid, fiery and melting glass performance.

Video footage from this event will be combined with images of Mount Rainier into a 12-minute video art piece—produced by MOG multimedia director Derek Klein in collaboration with conductor Sarah Ioannides. The video will accompany the May 13 World Premiere of Puyallup native Daniel Ott's symphonic poem *Fire Mountain*, commissioned by Symphony Tacoma.

The commission is funded by a generous gift from Carroll Bryan and Laurie Sorensen. Assisting in the launch of this project, the Symphony has the distinguished honor of being the

only Washington State grant recipient in a special award category of the National Endowment for the Arts and National Park System.

Mount Rainier National Park has a priority around educating the public—particularly urban dwellers—on how climate change is affecting the mountain’s fragile ecosystem, such as the annihilation of the ice caves during the past 60 years. Park representatives will provide in-depth talks about the status of the park, both at the concert and in events leading up to it, along with informational displays in the lobby detailing the plight of the glaciers and its consequences: river aggradation, flooding and infrastructure problems, reduction of subalpine meadows and decreasing animal habitats.

Events

Third Thursday. The youth artist glassblowing event takes place on Third Thursday, March 16 from 5-8 pm, when the museum is free and open to the public. The MOG hot shop team, working with Hilltop Artists high school students, will use blocks of ices and molten glass to engage the audience in an experiential relationship with the artistic process. The symbolism serves two purposes: molten glass offers a visual metaphor for both the flowing magma that has always been present within the mountain, and the ice represents the effects of climate change that affect its exterior. Symphony musicians will perform and improvise at this event, giving and receiving inspiration with the glassblowers as they create pieces interpreting the Mountain and Sea concept and highlighting the contrast between fire and ice.

High School String Orchestra Field Trip. On Wednesday, May 10, Sarah Ioannides and Daniel Ott will accompany the string orchestra students from Lincoln High School on a daylong field trip to Paradise on Mount Rainier. Symphony Tacoma violinist Gwen Taylor and bassist Anna Jensen, who spend eight weeks during the school year as string coaches and mentors at Lincoln, will chaperone the students as they learn to snow shoe, hear presentations about the extensive glacial system and the effects of climate change, and learn from Ott and Ioannides about the creative process and how an artist responds to external events to create art. Only a third of the students from this economically challenged high school have ever been to Mount Rainier. All students are invited to the dress rehearsal and provided with free tickets to the concert.

The unique interaction of the Salish Sea and Mount Rainier. Local Climatologist Dr. Michael Warner will provide an inspiring talk on the special interaction between sea and mountain that takes place in our region due to its unique geography. The date, time and location are yet to be determined, but the discussion will take place during the week preceding the Symphony’s season finale concert and will be free and open to the public. Dr. Warner, a protégé of Cliff Mass, has lectured and written extensively about extreme weather events, global warming, and atmospheric motions.

Culminating Concert, 7:30 pm Saturday, May 13, Pantages Theater. For this project, the Symphony commissioned a work by nationally-acclaimed composer Daniel Ott, who grew up in Puyallup. The project was initially conceived after the 2015 report on the status of Mount Rainier’s glaciers, which are rapidly receding due to climate change. A musical portrait of these natural wonders, Ott’s *Fire Mountain* utilizes 155 musicians, including the 85-piece Symphony Tacoma and 70-piece Symphony Tacoma Voices. Interwoven with Ott’s music will be Derek Klein’s art video, featuring footage from the glassblowing event along with images from the park.

Presented on a screen suspended above the orchestra, the visual depictions of the molten glass and snow-capped peak, together with the chorus vocals, will poignantly illustrate global warming and the resulting glacial melt. The end result will be a true *gesamtkunstwerk*: a multimedia artistic statement utilizing music, glass and video.

Also performed will be Grieg's "In the Hall of the Mountain King" and Debussy's Impressionist masterpiece *La Mer*. The program is characteristic of Music Director Sarah Ioannides's curatorial approach to programming: gem-setting a new artistic creation with colorful, complementary music from the core repertoire and visual elements. The result is a multi-media experience that is challenging yet accessible to audiences.

Outcomes

- Present a substantial collaboration between three Tacoma arts organizations on a scale rarely seen. While stressed by area funders, collaborations are time-consuming and challenging, and few achieve any level of effectiveness or prominence. What is particularly unique about this collaboration is that it is *artistic* rather than *administrative*. In addition, it merges the creation of new art with an environmental topic of vital importance to the region.
- Evoke community awareness, pride and an authentic sense of place. Famous worldwide, Mount Rainier is right on Tacoma's doorstep, and the project celebrates and pays homage to the region's most beloved and prominent natural resource. Daniel Ott, the music's nationally-rising composer, grew up in Puyallup under the mountain's shadow. The musicians who will premiere it all come from the surrounding area. The resurgence of glass art is a worldwide phenomenon and one of its epicenters is right here in Tacoma, at MOG.
- Engage under-served youth in a new cross-disciplinary artistic project. Hilltop Artists is a unique organization that teaches at-risk urban youth glassblowing at a non-profit embedded in their schools. Hilltop's close association with MOG provides students with multifaceted mentorship from experienced and world-renowned artists. Symphony Tacoma's string coaching presence in Lincoln and other at-risk area high schools brings together experienced performer-mentors with underserved student musicians, most of whom cannot afford private lessons.
- Demonstrate the relevance and impact of the arts. The project focuses on raising awareness about an environmental issue of great urgency and special relevance to the people of Tacoma and Pierce County. It will simultaneously engage and immerse people of various ages and socioeconomic backgrounds with symphonic music, glass art, and environmental education.
- Attract significant media coverage, resulting in high visibility and an opportunity to tell Tacoma's story in a new way.

Conclusion

Art responds to life, and by building relationships in the community, art can serve as a catalyst for education, growth and transformation in a region. Through a process of community collaboration and working in multiple mediums, this partnership seeks to produce an inspiring experience, leaving participants sobered by the gravity of the ecological situation, but hopeful and empowered to undertake an active role in protecting our region.

This collaboration could happen nowhere else!