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'Doctor' is in, as ASO hires profile-boosting consultant

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Looking to heighten its national presence, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra has created a new job — director of artistic planning — and hired a former record industry executive to fill it.

Evans Mirageas is known throughout the classical-music world for juggling many assignments at once. In the 1990s, he was the creative brain at the esteemed London-Decca label, where he masterminded the rise of soprano Renée Fleming, among other classical superstars. Before that, he was artistic administrator for the Boston Symphony.

In recent years, he's worked as an international artists-and-repertoire consultant with music ensembles from Los Angeles to Cologne, Germany. Last season, he took charge of the Cincinnati Opera while continuing to live in Minneapolis and manage his global consulting network.

For the past eight months, since the departure of long-time ASO artistic administrator Frank Dans, Mirageas has consulted on programming with the ASO.

"I don't need to hear about a musician from the grapevine," says Mirageas, whose salary was not disclosed. "I went to their concert in London or Berlin and heard it myself, and I'm the one who can recommend them the next morning. With technology it's possible that I travel, be in another city and, with 30 to 40 e-mails and phone calls a day, be an integral part of the ASO team." His duties will include scouting for talent and planning special projects.

ASO President and CEO Allison Vulgamore, who is on sabbatical until the summer, initiated his hiring in December. Among Mirageas' longtime clients is ASO music director Robert Spano; the two men worked together at the Brooklyn Philharmonic. In August, Opera News named Mirageas one of the "25 Most Powerful Names in Opera." The magazine gave him his own category: "The Doctor."

"We called him ['The Doctor'] because he tends to work someplace that's in trouble and fix it, then move on," says Opera News editor in chief F. Paul Driscoll. "He's project-oriented, doesn't promise more than he can deliver, and can help deal with a company's long-term financial health — dealing smoothly with donors and board members."

Although he'll visit Atlanta about once a month, Mirageas said he expects to be "very visible within the Atlanta community." ASO marketing chief Charlie Wade confirmed that the orchestra will deploy him at select fund-raising and subscriber events.

Part of Mirageas' success, industry insiders say, is his urbane persona and sophisticated tastes — and the fact that he comes to the nonprofit orchestral and opera world from the for-profit record industry, akin to the Metropolitan Opera's visionary general manager Peter Gelb, who ran the Sony Classical label. "There's no ivory tower," says Mirageas. "At Decca, we were dedicated to the highest artistic product while making a profit."

That corporate experience — for practical matters as well as mind-set — should help the ASO as it navigates an increasingly reluctant arts-philanthropy culture.

Mirageas says it will be Vulgamore's decision as to how involved he will be in the ASO's fund-raising drive for a planned \$300 million Symphony Center.

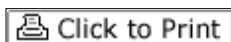
Sam Dixon, who runs Spivey Hall, the acclaimed recital hall in Clayton County, served as ASO artistic administrator in the early 1990s, and has known Mirageas even longer. "Evans won't know the Atlanta community with any specificity," Dixon says, "but he'll bring to the table ideas that will help the ASO move forward."

But, Dixon points out, the Mirageas hire is a new model for the ASO's artistic leadership. "If [Evans] is in Atlanta only rarely, he'll miss the day-to-day reality of the orchestra. It's a bit like planning a party and then not attending — you can't really know how it came off."

Still, hiring a power broker of Mirageas' caliber, he adds, "is a feather in the ASO's cap. It's a sign they're serious about moving forward and being a leader among orchestras on a national scale."

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