

BUSINESS

A philharmonic orchestra for the Upper Valley? That's music to this conductor's ears.

“It’s a combination of the fact that the area is so vibrant and so isolated from other orchestras around that seem to make it a fantastic place to set one up,” says John Masko, who is planning to bring the Upper Valley Philharmonic Society to the region in 2026

By Haley Clough Globe Correspondent, Updated March 21, 2025, 6:00 a.m.



Conductor John Masko rehearses with the Brockton Symphony at the Christ Congregational Church. DANIELLE PARHIZKARAN/GLOBE STAFF

To many New Englanders, the Upper Valley is just a small collection of southern Vermont and New Hampshire towns surrounding Dartmouth College, a prime spot to visit when the fall foliage season begins. But with the population of the Valley's four counties hovering around [200,000 people](#), it's actually a bustling region rich with music and the arts, said conductor John Masko.

Masko, a conductor of the [Brockton Symphony Orchestra](#) and 2021 recipient of an [American Prize in Conducting](#), moved to the Upper Valley with his fiancé in 2024, and it wasn't long before he found a common thread with the people he met.

"I learned a few things about the [Upper Valley](#) very quickly, one being that it's an extremely arts-interested and sophisticated place," he said. "People really love all kinds of arts, from theater to music to the visual arts."

So Masko wondered if there was room for something different. His idea? The Upper Valley Philharmonic Society.

The creation of such a group would fill the gaps in the area's orchestral music crowd, he said.

"It's a combination of the fact that the area is so vibrant and so isolated from other orchestras around that seem to make it a fantastic place to set one up," Masko said.



Veronica Wilson of Stoughton plays the cello during a rehearsal with the Brockton Symphony, led by conductor John Masko (not pictured), on Monday night. DANIELLE PARHIZKARAN/GLOBE STAFF

With no professional classical orchestra locally, some of the closest being the Vermont Symphony Orchestra or Symphony New Hampshire, the Upper Valley is full of eager musicians and music lovers looking for outlets, he said.

“I just started meeting and chatting with a lot of people who... would travel vast distances in order to see [orchestra concerts],” Masko said. “I asked them ‘Would you come and support a full, professional orchestra in your backyard,’ and they all said ‘Of course.’”

The area, primarily encompassing the towns of Hanover, Lebanon, and West Lebanon, N.H., and White River Junction and Norwich, Vt. is home to a host of regionally prolific performances and stages. The Lebanon Opera House, North Country Community Theatre (NCCT), Upper Valley Baroque, Upper Valley Music Center, and New England School of the Arts are pillars of the area’s local arts and social scene. Dartmouth College’s Hopkins Center for the Arts, [currently undergoing](#) an \$89 million renovation, is another well-recognized venue for professional and collegiate performers.

Masko is moving forward with plans for the Upper Valley Philharmonic Society and has been actively recruiting musicians. He hopes for a first performance in fall 2026.

“I was expecting to have to almost entirely [outsource musicians] for this orchestra, but as we started advertising the idea, I started hearing from musicians who live in the Upper Valley and nearby, who are pros, who travel and do gigs elsewhere,” he said.

“Some of them felt as though some of the other big orchestras in northern New England didn’t know they were there, and that’s one reason why, with this orchestra, we’re going to have an open audition to start so that hopefully, we can get a solid core of musicians who actually come from the area, in addition to people coming from farther away,” from Boston or New York.



Conductor John Masko rehearses with the Brockton Symphony at the Christ Congregational Church. DANIELLE PARHIZKARAN/GLOBE STAFF

Masko, who will lead the new orchestra, first conducted at his alma mater, presiding over the Yale Medical Symphony Orchestra. From there, he set out for the West Coast to complete his master's degree in conducting at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music before returning to his home state of Rhode Island, where he established the Providence Medical Orchestra in 2018.

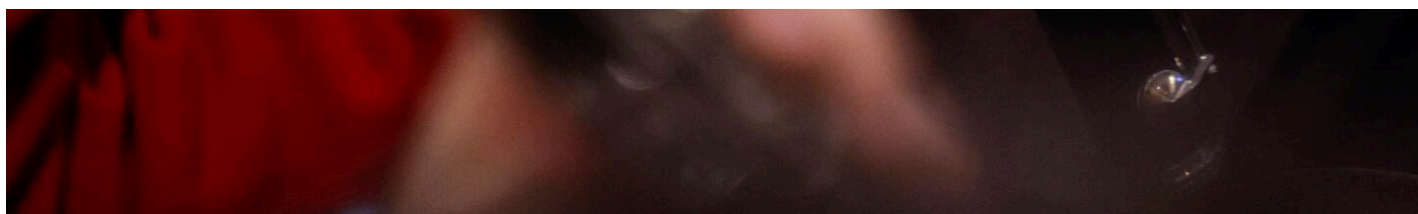
For Masko, music “exists primarily to serve the community,” and he said he hopes for the Upper Valley Philharmonic to be an educational space and partner. Bringing in major artists to work with students in schools or performing arts programs could bridge the gaps in arts education. He would also like to continue his work with medical orchestras, which have become a staple in his career, putting together performances for patients at Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center.

The plan is for the roughly 60-musician orchestra to schedule five to six concerts per year.

Besides performing the “classic oldies” like Beethoven and Tchaikovsky, Masko plans for UVPS to do collaborative “pops” concerts, which could range from rock to Celtic music to jazz.

More than that, though, Masko hopes to draw inspiration from the region’s rich history, rooting much of his performances in American and New England compositions. The northeastern US has historically been a hub of vibrant musical culture, he said. “In classical music, at least, a really big amount of the music that went into making the American sound, the greatest classical compositions, were written in New England,” he said. “Much of it has roots in northern New England, so it’s sort of a place-based way of thinking about it.”





The Brockton Symphony rehearses at the Christ Congregational Church. DANIELLE PARHIZKARAN/GLOBE STAFF

Preceding the Upper Valley Philharmonic is Upper Valley Baroque, which was founded in 2021 by Jo Shute and Allan Wieman, with Filippo Ciabatti as the artistic director.

Originally from Florence, Italy, Ciabatti works with UVB and as the orchestral and choral programs director at the Hopkins Center for the Arts at Dartmouth College.

The Hopkins Center, locally known as The Hop, has hosted an expansive repertoire when it comes to seasonal collaborations, Ciabatti said. The Dartmouth Symphony Orchestra has collaborated with violinist David Kim, pianist Kenneth Broberg, cellist Gabriel Cabezas, and actress Sharon Washington.

Ciabatti said UVB also has a great repertoire of guest musicians. The upcoming performance of Händel's "L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato" on April 5 and 6 will feature soprano Amanda Forsythe. Their May 17 performance, "A Bach Family Affair: Organ Music by J. S. Bach & His Circle," will include guest organist James Welch.

"We got so much love at the very beginning," Ciabatti said of UVB. While he originally outsourced musicians and resources from Boston, musicians now come from across the country: Seattle, San Francisco, New York, and of course from within the Upper Valley.

Basing itself in such a musically oriented community also has its perks when it comes to venues. Ciabatti said UVB uses the Lebanon Opera House, the Chandler Performing Arts Center in Randolph, the Claremont Opera House, and a variety of churches in Hanover, N.H.

If the success of Upper Valley Baroque is any indication, the Upper Valley Philharmonic Society should have minimal trouble not only procuring musicians but also finding places to perform, something Masko teased.

“There are a couple of venues in the Upper Valley who have the size we need, and we’ve been working with [them],” he said. “The key is, you need a big enough stage to host an orchestra of this size and you want a house that seats 500 people or more, and there are a few places in the Upper Valley like that.”

Masko believes his project makes a strong argument for the Upper Valley as a rural yet vibrant arts base. He said UVPS tells people, “[Y]ou can have all of what you get in that larger city, and we are much friendlier people and it’s a beautiful place, and you should stay here and enjoy this wonderful cultural area with us.”

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