



## Quote of the Week

*"We're growing Verizon up differently, with its own audience for a complete classical experience and then the chance for us to have a stunning impact on the presentations of artists who fill 12,000 seats."*

*— Allison Vulgamore, president and CEO, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra on the new amphitheatre in Alpharetta, Ga.*

## AMPHITHEATRES

### ATLANTA SYMPHONY STRIKES THE RIGHT NOTE WITH NEW 12,000-SEAT SHED

*Verizon Wireless Amphitheatre at Encore Park, Alpharetta, Ga., opening night, May 10, with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. (Photo Credit: Chris Lee)*



By all accounts and in the glow of a successful grand opening, the 12,000-seat, \$35 million Verizon Wireless Amphitheatre at Encore Park in Alpharetta, Ga., is on track to accomplish its mission.

Donald F. Fox, vice president for Business Development and CFO, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra (ASO), listed two immediate wow-factors for the new

venue: Selling out three shows for the Eagles in 90 minutes, 36,000 tickets (May 14, 16 and 17), which led to a fourth show May 20; and “seeing all of our ensembles play before the largest paid audience in the history of our institutions, folks who paid solely to see the symphony.” (May 10, the inaugural concert).

This is actually the third venue playing home to the ASO, and obviously the largest. The amphitheatre was built to be self-sustaining, hence the 26 pop and contemporary concerts booked; to enlarge the loyal ASO audience, a given with the opening night crowd; and to serve the community, Fox said.

Allison Vulgamore, president and CEO, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, noted that Verizon Wireless Amphitheater is another cog in a unique business model that sees ASO operating and performing in a symphony hall and two amphitheaters, one owned and operated, one a shared business venture (Chastain Park). “We have three ensembles plus two education groups performing at three different venues all a division of a parent company.” ASO performs its primary season at the Symphony Hall at the Woodruff Arts Center downtown; presents shows at Chastain Park south of Atlanta, part of their repertoire for 35 years; and now operates and presents at Verizon Wireless Amphitheater north of town.

Fox did not see constructing 12,000-seat sheds to extend the business model as a trend for orchestras, noting the Hollywood Bowl, Los Angeles; Riverbend Music Center, Cincinnati; Ravinia Festival, Highland Park near Chicago; and Tanglewood in Boston are all symphony homes, to name a few. “This is just another brick in the wall,” he said.

“We are clear about our own mission,” Vulgamore added. “Our mission statement calls for reaching ever broader audiences in newer venues; this is a continuation of the core music we have been presenting, but in an exciting new venue in which the orchestra will be able to perform.

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Patrick Leahy, 409 Inc., who is a consultant on this project, can imagine other orchestras sitting up and taking note. “The fact we’re doing the Eagles and [Tom] Petty and Rod Stewart, clearly the industry has recognized it’s a fine, magnificent facility. The amenities are second to none,” he said.

At the same time if the orchestra draws an “audience that says the orchestra is playing at our hip concert venue” and turns out for classical performances when they might not have in the past, that’s success, Leahy said.

Leahy, a veteran of seven venue grand openings who has been in the amphitheater business for decades, said Verizon Wireless is a “combination of being very fresh and new and full of all the amenities you would want from a consumer’s and performer’s standpoint.”

The setting features 80-100 foot trees that were saved during construction and another 1,300 planted nearby.

The stagehouse is set up for an orchestra, requiring expansive back-of-house amenities, including six main headliner dressing rooms, a large orchestra dressing room, and a smaller chorus dressing room. It’s built for much more than a touring rock show, he observed.

“The catering kitchen built backstage is the nicest catering kitchen in any amphitheater I’m familiar with and I’m familiar with 38 of them,” Leahy said. Ovations Food Services is the concessionaire.

On stage, ASO added a portable, acoustical fabric shell to encompass the orchestra in white fabric and spectacular lighting, as opposed to encompassing the stage in black, which is the rock and roll method. The shell makes the shed flexible enough to go from the orchestra one night to loading in the Eagles the next.

“I can see other orchestras saying here’s a model that could work for us,” Leahy said. “I expect when we get through this season, Don Fox is likely to get several calls.” The venue is being booked in house by Clay Schell and through Dave Lucas and his 360 Concerts. It will host 15-20 community events, a big part of the mission. “For us, it is as important, almost critically important, that the Alpharetta High School is holding its first graduation from the venue, alongside the Eagles, in how we measure our success,” Vulgamore said.

James Drinkard, assistant city manager, Alpharetta, looked at the amphitheater’s value to the city, beyond the straight line economic impact, as the next phase in developing small town/suburban America. Alpharetta has a population of 53,000, which swells to 120,000 during the work day. The city has concentrated on residential, office and retail development. Cultural amenities are the next logical step, enhancing the quality of life and making it attractive for the quality of worker that business needs to attract. The city put up \$1 million toward the land and the city’s development authority worked on an industrial revenue bond, not an encumbrance on the city, just a conduit for the lending, Drinkard said.

He said they have gotten a few calls from other cities about what they did and how they did it, but when cities of comparable size find out this is a 12,000-seat venue, they back off. Most are still in the amphitheater-for-the-local-jazz-ensemble frame of mind, he said, but that might change with a success story to

tell in Alpharetta.

The shed is available for rentals though, Fox said. ASO will promote most events.

Parking is included in the ticket, as is a facility fee. On the amenities side, the seats are wide, 21-22 inches, versus the 19-inch model, Leahy pointed out. The lower bowl seats are folding chairs so the venue can be set up cabaret style with tables and chairs as an alternative to row seating. In a row configuration, there are 7,000 seats in the bowl and 5,000 on the lawn.

“Not everyone in the business of promoting concerts is doing it purely to provide a return to a shareholder,” Leahy said. “To be a music presenter, you have to do more than rock shows. You have to do more than the mainstream four country acts, six or seven rock shows, a handful of classic rock shows, and that’s the span of your repertoire.”

“Acts might say it’s cheaper in this marketplace to play three shows, without the transportation cost of four shows in four cities,” Leahy added, positioning the new venue. “The trend, with the way technology is going, is acts will say we don’t have to truck all our gear from show to show, let’s scale down our costs. Mid and smaller acts will start renting locally.” The plan is to position Verizon Wireless Amphitheatre to handle it all.

His excitement, in part, after all these years in the business, is that this is a “legacy piece,” he said, explaining that while some amphitheaters are being shut down because they are not making enough money, the symphony isn’t going anywhere and is not swayed by the stock market or money. “To be successful longterm, you have to be more to the community than just promoting shows,” Leahy said.

And still, it came in under budget and on time. — Linda Deckard

*Interviewed for this story: Don Fox and Allison Vulgamore, (404) 733-4900; Patrick Leahy, (513) 898-1641; James Drinkard, (678) 297-6014*