



Photos by Mark Weber/The Commercial Appeal

IRIS conductor Michael Stern is ready for the orchestra's independence: "It allows IRIS to do things in this community and elsewhere that we couldn't do before."

Breaking free

Opportunities, obligations await IRIS next year in its first season as an independent orchestra

By **CHRISTOPHER BLANK** / blank@commercialappeal.com

AFTER SEVEN YEARS of devoting tax dollars to the country's only municipally created professional orchestra, the City of Germantown parted ways with its most celebrated cultural attraction last February.

Next season, the group formerly known as the IRIS Chamber Orchestra will test the waters of independence, almost as a precocious teenager leaving her parents' oversight and bank account.

"This is not about Germantown any longer," said the ensemble's new managing director, Mary Morris, whose husband, Scott Morris, runs the Church Health Center. "This is about having a wonderful resource in the community that we didn't want to give up."

IRIS has dropped the word "Chamber" from its



name because it connoted limitations in size and repertoire.

Last week, the orchestra received its official nonprofit 501(c)(3) designation. It now has a seven-member board of directors and a lot of money to raise: about \$1 million annually.

Through an agreement with the city, IRIS still has keys to its parents' car, otherwise known as the 824-seat Germantown Performing Arts Centre, the venue that gave birth to the IRIS concept.

Moving onward may not have been part of the original plan, but it was necessary after Germantown's Board of Aldermen realized that to shore up budget shortfalls, the city couldn't afford the expensive group founded in 2000 by GPAC's then-director, Albert Pertaion, and IRIS' music

IRIS

director and conductor, Michael Stern.

"There is nothing analogous to IRIS in the country," Stern said. "The great thing about Albert was that he really embraced this intrepid idea that we could make up our organization as we went along. Germantown's Board of Aldermen took a great leap of faith and gave us the infrastructure to get started."

The IRIS model turns out to be a reasonably simple concept that offers the most flexibility in music making and budget. It's also a dream job for a music director who likes maximum control.

Stern selects his programs, his soloists and 20 to 50 core players drawn from a hand-picked list of people scattered across the country. Some Memphis Symphony principals also contract with IRIS.

The musicians fly in on concert weekends, have two or three rehearsals, and perform one concert.

Costs are minimized thanks in part to host families who put up the visiting musicians. Unlike resident orchestras, IRIS doesn't have union rules, doesn't pay benefits and has few overhead costs. No office, no trucks and only three regular employees: Stern, Morris and orchestra manager David DePeters.

In the initial two-year contract that severed IRIS from the city, GPAC will provide in-kind stage managers, stage hands, ushers, box office support, rental equipment and nonmonetary marketing assistance.

By comparison, the Memphis Symphony Orchestra, based at the Cannon Center, has a \$4.3

Los Angeles Philharmonic, one of the country's major ensembles, has an \$82 million annual budget.

Skeptics have argued that IRIS has all the ingredients of a wobbly pick-up orchestra.

But most first-time listeners are impressed by its quality. IRIS has featured heavy-hitting soloists such as Joshua Bell, Yo-Yo Ma and Itzhak Perlman.

Scheduled for the upcoming 2007-2008 season, to be unveiled at tonight's GPAC concert, are pianist Garrick Ohlsson and cellist Lynn Harrell, among others.

Stern says that high-caliber playing is encouraged by the group's friendly, but competitive atmosphere. Players who don't live up to Stern's exacting standards aren't invited back.

National critics have taken note. A recording of one of IRIS' commissioned works, written by Steven Hartke, made New York Times critic Anthony Tommasini's best of 2003 list.

Leaving the nest

Orchestras are luxuries for any city, and Germantown, with a population of just over 40,000, was paying a hefty bill.

In the current fiscal year, a \$184,000 city grant was set aside for Stern's duties as IRIS conductor and artistic director. The city hoped to raise another \$350,000 in donations to support IRIS. But fund-raising fell through, and by the time the city agreed to split with the orchestra, there was an estimated \$263,000 shortfall, according to Ralph Gabb, Germantown's controller who also handles the GPAC books.

As an independent organization, IRIS' costs have increased, but so has its ability to court donors outside GPAC's primary audience base.

"The downside was that

financial obligation," Morris said. "But the upside is that this new configuration lets us think of all the things IRIS can be doing."

Stern also views the parting as a positive step in the orchestra's growth.

"The city is not responsible for us," he said. "What does that mean? It allows IRIS to do things in this community and elsewhere that we couldn't do before. We can encompass the whole Memphis area."

IRIS is already expanding its educational outreach next season, and will send its soloists to work with students from the Stax Academy.

Music, Maestro!

Music director Michael Stern has done some of his own growing since he established IRIS in September 2000 for his first sold-out season.

An opinionated and informative conductor, he often shares his thoughts with the audience between pieces.

His personal journey has also been reflected on the stage. When his father, the great violinist Isaac Stern, died in 2001, he conducted an emotional tribute concert at GPAC featuring Beethoven's Triple Concerto played by Yo-Yo Ma, Emmanuel Ax and Jaime Laredo — some of the biggest names in the business.

Stern has divorced and remarried, and recently became a father.

In addition to his frequent international guest-conducting jobs, Stern was named music director of the Kansas City Symphony in 2004.

His programming for IRIS is often challenging, unusual material, often not found in the mainstream classical repertoire.

Of the 255 works he has programmed for eight (including the forthcoming)

repeated.

One of them, scheduled in January 2008, is Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, with its famous four opening notes, often described as the hand of fate knocking at the door.

"We've gone through all of the Beethoven symphonies," he said. "So we're back to the one that started off our first season. "I think it's appropriate, given that we're, in a way, starting off on a new journey. IRIS is poised to reinvent itself."

IRIS Orchestra Season 2007-2008

■ **Oct. 13** — with violinist **Choi-Liang Lin**

Golijov: "Last Round"
Barber: Violin Concerto
Brahms: Symphony No. 3

■ **Nov. 10** — with soprano **Nancy Maultsby**

Bach: First Brandenburg Concerto
Elgar: "Sea Pictures," Op. 37
Hartke: "A Brandenburg Autumn"
Schubert: Symphony No. 6, "Little C Major"

■ **Dec. 1** — with pianist **Alon Goldstein**

Beethoven: Leonore Overture No. 1
Tchaikovsky: Piano Concerto No. 2 in G

■ **Jan. 26** — with cellist **Lynn Harrell**

Diamond: "Romeo and Juliet" Suite
Saint-Saens: Cello Concerto No. 1
Beethoven: Symphony No. 5

■ **March 29** — with violinist **Charles Wetherbee** and violist **Roberto Diaz**

Delius: "Irmelin" Prelude
Leshnoff: Double Concerto for Violin, Viola and Orchestra (Commissioned work)

Dvorak: Symphony No. 7

■ **April 26, 2008** — with pianist **Garrick Ohlsson**

Martin: Concerto for Seven Instruments and Strings
Dvorak: "Legends," Op. 59
Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 5, "Emperor"

— Christopher Blank: 529-2305