



Renee Gilliland and the Magic of Cirque

WRITTEN BY JESSICA BAUTERS

Brahms. Barroso. Tchaikovsky. Cyr wheels. One of these things is not like the others. Yet, all will be on the program for the Boulder Philharmonic Orchestra's final concert of the 2023-24 season.

Aerialists and ribbon dancers might not be what you'd expect to see on (or above) the Macky Auditorium stage. But as Assistant Conductor Renee Gilliland puts it, the breathtaking sights and sounds in store at "Cirque Returns" will make it precisely the kind of event you'll want to make time for.

"This is a really singular event," Gilliland says. "You're basically pairing together some of the greatest and most beloved classical repertoire with Cirque's really impressive acts, such as aerialists, cyr wheels (a large metal hoop with a performer balancing inside), ribbon dances, quick change artists and many more. Each artist brings to each piece an entirely different virtuosity, and I look forward to helping bring that to life."

Gilliand, who will conduct the matinee and evening performances with Cirque de la Symphonie on May 4, says she also never expected to conduct a symphonic circus of sorts.

But what a dream come true! These are incredible artists, super specialized in what they do, bringing a completely different element to the concert experience. I'm so honored.

In her five years with the orchestra, Gilliland has become a mainstay of both mainstage Macky presentations and outreach performances across the Boulder region, working with 400 children so far this year alone as part of the Meet the Maestro educational series. She says the breadth of musical experiences offered by the Phil – from community outreach to classical performances to unique experiences like Cirque – are part of what has helped the orchestra solidify itself as an irreplaceable part of the local community.

"The season has been spectacular, and I would say this is a concert that continues to highlight the excellence of the Phil, in addition to bringing in a group of artists who are manifesting the music in real time magnificently," says Gilliland. "I love that the orchestra is not in a pit, but up on the stage. There will be some real close





Despite the added elements — and the fact that the Cirque performers will be behind and above her — Gilliland says preparation for this performance has been right up her alley.

“The focus is on having a really high quality of preparation for the repertoire. Even though each piece and artist is unique, the concert has an electric flow. You’re basically going from one mesmerizing piece to the next, so there’s an arc and the pacing and tempo are particularly important, even though I can’t necessarily watch the performers.”

All that will combine for a memorable season closer, Gilliland says. And she speaks from experience: This won’t be her first time in the concert hall with Cirque.

“I saw this performance with the Dallas Symphony many years ago, and I never forgot it,” Gilliland recalls.

It’s so magical. I took some family who hadn’t been to an orchestral concert in a long time and we were all taken by its beauty. I hope people bring their loved ones to Macky as well.

Like Meet the Maestro, Gilliland says Cirque Returns is another way the Phil is living its mission, connecting people to music, music to ideas, and people to people.

“We want people to feel that it’s their orchestra — that it belongs to them. It’s their home. Families can come and create great memories and experiences that they’ll cherish through beautiful music.”

And the benefit to that kind of connection doesn’t stop with the audience.

“I think you can tell that the audiences connect with the orchestra, and the orchestra connects with the audience,” she explains. “There’s mutual love, and no fourth wall. The energy goes between and transcends the stage, even in a large and impressive space like Macky.”

Maestra Renee Gilliland conducting the Boulder Philharmonic Orchestra in June 2022 | Photo by Jamie Kraus Photography

