

PRESS RELEASE: FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE



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A previous version of this news release incorrectly listed the concert date. The correct date is Saturday, Jan. 31. The news release has been updated.



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Arkansas Symphony Orchestra Launches New Family Concert Series with Sensory-Friendly Performance of 'Carnival of the Animals'

LITTLE ROCK, AR. (Jan. 8, 2026) — The [Arkansas Symphony Orchestra](#) will launch a new series of family concerts with a sensory-friendly performance of “Carnival of the Animals” at noon on Saturday, Jan. 31, at the [ASO Stella Boyle Smith Music Center](#). Designed to welcome audiences of all ages and abilities, this concert marks the first of several family-focused performances at the orchestra’s permanent home.

Conducted by Valery Saul, the program features Camille Saint-Saëns’ beloved “Carnival of the Animals,” brought to life with narration by Ryan D. Davis. It will feature 11 musicians, with principal cellist David Gerstein playing the famous “Swan” with pianists Carl Anthony and Hee-Kyung Juhn. The concert is designed to be engaging, accessible and relaxed, offering families an inviting introduction to live orchestral music.

“‘Carnival of the Animals’ is pure joy to perform, and it’s especially meaningful when we can share it in a way that truly welcomes families to experience music together,” Saul said. “These concerts are about curiosity, imagination and connection — letting children and parents feel comfortable, be themselves and discover the orchestra in a joyful, pressure-free environment.”

This performance is presented as a sensory-friendly concert adapted for individuals with autism, sensory sensitivities or other neurodivergent needs. Accommodations include reduced sound levels — particularly for sudden or loud passages — softer stage and house lighting, and a smaller audience size to create a less overwhelming environment. Audience members are welcome to move freely, stand, dance or step out as needed. Talking, vocalizing and the use of electronic devices as communication tools are permitted.

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Additional features may include flexible seating options and opportunities for close-up, interactive experiences with instruments, supported by trained volunteers. The goal is to create a welcoming, non-judgmental space where families can enjoy music together in whatever way is most comfortable for them.

The ASO Stella Boyle Smith Music Center, located in Little Rock's East Village, serves as a radically welcoming hub for musical activity in Arkansas. Family and sensory-friendly concerts are a key part of the orchestra's commitment to making live music accessible for all Arkansans.

The Stella Boyle Smith Trust is the sponsor of this concert. Tickets are \$5 per person. All attendees, including children, require a ticket. Tickets can be purchased online at arkansassymphony.org, at the Box Office in the music center before the concert, or by phone at (501) 666-1761, ext. 1.

Artists

Valery Saul, ASO Associate Conductor

(bio: arkansassymphony.org/about-aso/associate-conductor)

Ryan D. Davis, Narrator

Program

“Carnival of the Animals”

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

Text by Ogden Nash (1902-1971)

I. Introduction and Royal March of the Lion

II. Hens and Roosters

III. Wild Donkeys

IV. Tortoises

V. The Elephant

VI. Kangaroos

VII. Aquarium

VIII. People with Long Ears

IX. The Cuckoo in the Depths of the Forest

X. Aviary

XI. Pianists

XII. Fossils

XIII. The Swan

XIV. Finale

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ORCHESTRA

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About The Arkansas Symphony Orchestra

The Arkansas Symphony Orchestra is the leading employer of professional performing artists in Arkansas and is celebrating its 60th season in 2025-2026. The ASO recently opened its first permanent home, the ASO Stella Boyle Smith Music Center, in the East Village between Heifer International and the Clinton Presidential Library. The state's first music center is a radically welcoming hub of musical activity for all Arkansans, housing programs of the E. Lee Ronnel Music Academy, a broadcast studio, and the River Rhapsodies Chamber Music Series. ASO is the resident orchestra at Robinson Center and performs over 60 concerts yearly for more than 165,000 people through its Stella Boyle Smith Masterworks Series, First Orion Pops Series, River Rhapsodies Chamber Music Series, and numerous concerts throughout Arkansas. The E. Lee Ronnel Music Academy reaches over 30,000 Arkansans in over 200 schools from ages 4 to 104 through the string academy, youth ensembles, bucket band, community orchestra, the annual Children's Concert, and more. In 2020, over 1 million people in over 30 countries viewed the ASO musician-led Bedtime with Bach series. The ASO employs 14 full-time musicians, over 70 part-time musicians, and 16 administrative staff members with an annual operating budget of \$4.5 million. The ASO is a member of the League of American Orchestras and a partner orchestra of the National Alliance for Audition Support, an unprecedented national initiative to increase diversity in American orchestras. For more information about the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra call 501-666-1761 or visit www.arkansassymphony.org.

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