

PRESS RELEASE: FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE



Press Contact: Lance Turner

Mobile: 501-944-4889

Email: lance@ghidotti.com

Arkansas Symphony Orchestra's Tom McDonald **To Retire As Conductor of Academy Orchestra**

Music Leader Caps 48 Years of Teaching Young Musicians

LITTLE ROCK, AR. (April 2, 2026)— The [Arkansas Symphony Orchestra \(ASO\)](#) today announced that Tom McDonald, the longtime conductor of the ASO Academy Orchestra, will retire from that role, capping a remarkable career that shaped generations of young Arkansas musicians and music lovers.

McDonald, who has conducted the Arkansas Symphony Academy Youth Orchestra since 1998, will lead his final full concert with the Academy Orchestra during its [spring concert](#) at 7 p.m. Friday, April 24, at Cabot High School. The concert will include performances of Ludwig van Beethoven's stirring Allegretto from Symphony No. 7, Howard Shore's "Fellowship of the Ring" and the first movement of Felix Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E Minor.

"Tom McDonald's impact on the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra and on music education across our state is immeasurable," ASO Music Director and Conductor Geoff Robson said. "For decades, he has led with musicianship, discipline, warmth and unwavering belief in young people. Because of Tom's inspiring leadership, countless students have grown not only as performers, but as confident, capable people. His legacy will continue to resonate across Arkansas for generations."

McDonald will lead the orchestra in one final performance on Saturday, May 9, in the lobby of the Robinson Center before the ASO Pops concert, ["Three Broadway Divas."](#) A reception celebrating his legacy will follow the concert.

McDonald will continue to perform as part of the ASO. His retirement as Academy Orchestra conductor marks the conclusion of 48 years of service developing young musicians whose careers and lives have carried them into fields ranging from medicine, information technology, finance and law to music education and professional performance.

"It has been one of the greatest privileges of my life to work with so many talented young musicians through the Academy Orchestra," McDonald said. "Watching students grow in skill, confidence and love for music has brought me enormous joy over the years. I am deeply grateful to the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra, to the families who entrusted their children to this program, and to the many students who made every rehearsal and performance meaningful."

McDonald is the third conductor of the ASO Academy Orchestra, succeeding Ernest Lamb in the role. Under his leadership, the ensemble became an important training ground for young musicians from across the state, combining artistic excellence with mentorship and encouragement.

McDonald has been a violinist with the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra since 1976 and is also a member of the Conway Symphony Orchestra. He also served the Pine Bluff Symphony in multiple roles, including assistant conductor, concertmaster, principal second and youth orchestra conductor during different periods of its 25-year history.

In addition to his performing and conducting career, McDonald was an orchestra director in the Little Rock Public Schools from 1978 to 2015, teaching at Central, Hall, J.A. Fair and Parkview high schools, as well as Dunbar, Henderson, Mann, Mabelvale and Pulaski Heights middle schools. He served on the music faculty at Arkansas Governor's School from 2000 to 2018.

The ASOYE has offered unique performance experiences to Arkansas' leading student musicians for more than 50 years. With three ensembles and nearly 200 members, the ASOYE serves those ages 9-19, from communities throughout Arkansas.

General admission tickets are \$10. Tickets can be purchased at www.ArkansasSymphony.org; at the concert venue beginning 60 minutes before a concert; or by phone at 501-666-1761, ext. 1. Thanks to Bank OZK of Little Rock, all Arkansas students are admitted free with the purchase of an adult ticket.

ASOYE Spring Concert Program (April 24)

Prelude Orchestra

Georg Friedrich Handel — Sarabande from Suite XI, HWV 437
Elliot Del Borgo — Concertino in G

Academy Orchestra

Ludwig van Beethoven — Symphony No. 7, Mvt. II Allegretto, Arr. William Rich
Howard Shore — "Fellowship of the Ring," Arr. John Whitney
Camille Saint Saens — "Marche Militaire Francaise," Arr. Merle J. Isaac

Youth Orchestra

Felix Mendelssohn — Violin Concerto in E Minor, 1st Movement
Howard Hanson — Symphony No. 2

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, ASO Children's Choir, 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 \$4.9 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.

###