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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Kern Celebrates 25 Years with the Valley Symphony Association

Montrose, CO –The Valley Symphony Association (VSA) invites the entire region to come together to celebrate Conductor Mike Kern’s 25 years with the volunteer organization. The concert, “’Tis the Season for Romance,” will feature music of the Romantic Period that, 150 years later, showcases timeless songs, soaring melodies, and rich harmonies performed by virtuoso instrumentalists. The Sunday, February 25, 3 p.m. concert at the Montrose Pavilion features internationally recognized Violinist Carlos Elias, formerly the Director of Strings and Orchestra at Colorado Mesa University and Concertmaster of the Grand Junction Symphony Orchestra for 14 years. A reception with a complimentary buffet will follow the concert and allow the public to greet Elias and congratulate Kern.

“It’s not just waving a stick in the air,” said Kern, of working with a volunteer orchestra. “There are so many things to consider.” Musicians span 75 years in age and hail from throughout the North Fork and Uncompahgre Valleys. The group gathers only weekly under Kern’s baton to coordinate – to fractions of a second – physical actions and complexities that must come together during a single concert, all so that an audience can be moved through the creativity and talent these artists offer as they make music together as one. Schedules allow for just a few two-hour rehearsals before they must be “concert ready.” Synchronizing all this has been Kern’s responsibility, and his passion, for 25 years.

Now retired from teaching instrumental and vocal music in public schools, he played string bass and electric bass guitar professionally for many years in all genres of music and has performed with such notable

musicians as Marvin Gaye, Freddie Hubbard, Wes Montgomery, Doc Severinson, and Buddy DeFranco. Kern plays bass regularly with a local jazz quintet, Take 5, and recently played bass for the November 2017 Magic Circle production of “West Side Story.”

Reflecting on his longevity with the organization and its cultural importance to the community, Kern stressed the dedication of the board that keeps the doors open and the musicians who, for 47 years, continue to draw people through them.

“Without a great board of directors who believe that the VSA Orchestra and Chorus are an integral part of our community, and that the music adds to the overall worth of our community, we could not survive,” Kern stated. Underscoring how much he enjoys working with the VSA Board, Kern gave a shout out to long-time Board Member Priscilla Fry, stating, “Her boundless energy and dedication makes the whole organization function smoothly, and it is a joy to work with her.”

When asked about the board’s vision, Fry emphasized their aim to grow the audience to multiple performances of each concert. “It’s really a matter of getting the word out about the VSA and what a special, enjoyable experience an afternoon of live orchestral and choral music can be,” explained Fry. “We encourage people who might not consider themselves ‘symphony goers’ to attend a performance, and use it as an opportunity to bring people together, be it a group of friends who get dressed up and go out together, a date night, or a way multiple generations of a family can connect,” Fry noted. “People are truly blown away when they attend a concert for the first time and experience the talent that lives and walks among us.”

Fry pointed out that area businesses benefit from the many people who descend on Montrose for the concerts, especially restaurants. “Some audience members take the opportunity of being in town to go shopping before the concerts, and many of the musicians and audience members round out the event with a post-concert dinner.”

In addition to the economic impact of arts organizations, Kern spoke to the historical importance and cultural character they bring to a community. He mentioned that such groups are becoming “more and

more rare,” and that Montrose is “so lucky” to have two such organizations: Magic Circle Theater for 56 years and the VSA for 47 years. “In small communities, it takes dedicated artists to make performances happen, as there are usually not that many resources to fund professional organizations,” Kern continued. “Without the arts, a community does not have a heart and soul,” Kern stated, “And art is a reflection of its life and history.”

As for the work product – the music – Kern pointed out the extraordinary alchemy that makes the VSA possible. “It’s not easy finding talented instrumentalists who are capable and willing to invest their time to make performances special and something to be proud of,” said Kern. “These musicians have spent years – some, decades – learning to play their instruments,” he stated. “These performers are real people who have lives of their own, yet they are willing to give of themselves to perform some of the greatest music in the world,” Kern continued. “It does not happen often that small communities without colleges (with music students and their musician instructors) can have an orchestra that does a regular subscription series of concerts year after year,” he said. “It’s really exceptional.”

<<NOTE: THE FOLLOWING HIGHLIGHTED SECTION MAY BE INCLUDED AS IS, OR REMOVED AND USED AS A SIDEBAR WITHIN THE STORY, DEPENDING ON SPACE LIMITATIONS AND LAYOUT>>

How much time does it take to put on a performance? Kern mused, “It depends.” To provide some perspective to the uninitiated, he used this year’s “Christmas by Candlelight” concert to illustrate. “There were 42 musicians who came together for 5 2-hour rehearsals, and each averaged 5 hours of private practice, showed up to a sectional or two, attended a dress rehearsal, performed in two concerts that included early stage call times,” he explained, “and when you factor in commute times, conductor prep-time, and board meetings, the math easily adds up to well over 1,000 man-hours for a single performance.” He emphasized that this number does not include the time the 60+ member choir put in or other volunteers who helped with staging and large instrument transport.

Ticket prices range from \$5 to \$20, depending on age and concert type. With Kern’s example, a ticket holder pays less than half a cent an hour

toward what it takes to present the event. “We aren’t asking much,” Kern chuckles. “I’d say that’s a heck of a deal – wouldn’t you?”

From a bottom line perspective of a board member, “Ticket sales certainly help,” Fry states, “and our advertisers, benefactors, and season sponsors, whom we appreciate so very much, do most of the heavy lifting from a budget standpoint.” To grow the organization, broaden their audience, and add performances, “We would certainly welcome even more financial support to help offset the cost of music and hall rentals in Delta for rehearsals and Montrose for dress rehearsals and concerts at the Pavilion.” One newer way for donors to support the organization is to sponsor an individual section in the orchestra and choir. “We’d really love to see sectional sponsorships catch on.”

The 75-year age range of its membership is another unique aspect of the performance group. “It speaks to the notion that music really is the one ‘universal language of mankind,’ to call on Longfellow, that it brings us all together, regardless of age,” said Kern. Youthful musicians sit side-by-side with seasoned musicians, and they benefit from each other’s presence while coming together to deliver memorable performances.

At 16 years old, cellist Christian DeCosta of Eckert, who has been performing with the VSA since he was 13, is its youngest member. “I get to experience what it will be like to play in a professional orchestra one day,” said DeCosta. “I love that the people around me will take the time to help me when I need it,” he continued. He described the atmosphere as light yet serious, and that, “Everybody is awesome.” His contemporaries include teenagers from Telluride and Delta, all who also perform with the Valley Youth Orchestra (VYO), which the VSA supports. VSA Concertmaster Debbie TenNapel of Montrose serves as the VYO conductor.

The longevity award easily goes to violinist Vivian Cheney, 91, of Paonia. Active with the VSA for 41 of its 47 years, the former schoolteacher has always looked forward to Thursday evening rehearsals. She said of the age range, “It’s a joy to play alongside young people; we really do compliment each other.”

The VSA started out small. In 1970 a small group of classical musicians met to practice in the parlor of Wilma and Charles Lowe's Eckert home. By 1982, there were 30 musicians practicing once a week in Delta and performing 4 concerts a year. Cheney noted that in the VSA's early days, "We used to be fewer in number and not so good, but we've made real progress over the years, having grown in size and musical ability." Today, more than 50 instrumentalists and 60 vocalists make up the VSA and orchestra and chorus that perform 6 concerts at the Montrose Pavilion between October and May, including 2 performances in December of "Christmas by Candlelight." Together they kick off each season in September with 2 free outdoor performances of popular music, known as their "Pops Concerts" in Cedaredge and Montrose.

"Each and every musician who has contributed over my 25 years, and those who did so before my tenure, has made an indelible contribution to our community," Kern said, again bringing the focus back to VSA's cultural impact on the past, present, and future. "And we are always welcoming new members, those who will help make the future possible," he said. "I enjoy working with all the different personalities and talents, and every time we perform, I am extremely, extremely proud of the musicians and how much we grow musically at each showing, all while giving our audience an outstanding concert."

Cheney is quick to point out that much of this growth in size and quality has come under the leadership of Kern, and speaks for the entire organization when she says, "I think he's terrific."

With this admiration and gratitude for his years of service, the organization's 47th season has been a love letter of sorts to Kern and his consistent and passionate presence. With no thought of slowing down, his focus is on the VSA and its musicians. "Right at this moment, I cannot envision doing anything else; I am just so proud and humbled to be a part of it," Kern said. "Vivian is 91 and still playing; we'll see how long I can last!"

For information, upcoming concerts, the audition process, and tickets, visit ValleySymphony.net and on Facebook @valleysymphonyassociation.

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COURTESY PHOTOS

Photo 1:

Mike Kern conducts the VSA Orchestra during a recent performance. Kern is celebrating 25 years with the 47-year old regional volunteer arts organization.

Photo 2:

Vivian Cheney, 91, lower left, faces Christian DeCosta (16, of Eckert) as he plays cello with the orchestra at a recent concert. The two musicians represent the organization's 75-year age span.

Photo 3:

The 2017-2018 VSA Orchestra with Conductor Mike Kern.

Photo 4:

Youth and maturity in harmony: Violinists Chase Ferguson (21, of Eckert) and Vivian Cheney (91, of Paonia) at a recent VSA orchestra rehearsal.

Photo 5:

Allison Sullivan (17, of Cedaredge), Christian DeCosta (16, of Eckert), and Chase Ferguson (21, of Eckert) at a recent rehearsal. Sullivan and DeCosta also play with the VYO, which the VSA supports, while Ferguson is an alumna. The VYO is lead by Debbie TenNapel of Montrose, who also serves as the VSA's Concertmaster.

Photo 6:

Carlos Elias, guest violinist will perform Violin Concerto in G Minor with the VSA on Sunday, February 25, at the Montrose Pavilion. Elias, an internationally recognized violinist, is the former Director of Strings and Orchestra at Colorado Mesa University and was Concertmaster of the Grand Junction Symphony Orchestra for 14 years.

About the concert, “’Tis the Season for Romance”

Sunday February 25, 2018

3:00 pm

Montrose Pavilion

Featuring Violinist Carlos Elias with the Valley Symphony Orchestra

The Romantic Period of music was a time of soaring melodies and rich harmonies performed by virtuoso instrumentalists. Composers took their imaginations to new heights, leaving us nearly 150 years later with beloved songs enjoyed by all generations. Guest violist, Carlos Elias, will be performing one of the most loved and often performed Romantic violin concertos, Max Bruch’s “Violin Concerto in G Minor.” The Orchestra will continue with Brahms’ “Variations on a Theme of Haydn” to end a romantic musical evening.

About the soloist: Carlos Elias

Carlos Elias has performed in solo recitals and in orchestras in the US, El Salvador, Argentina, Bulgaria, and Japan, and has participated in music festivals all over the nation, including the Western Slope Music Festival.

He began his musical studies at the age of five at the National Center of Arts in San Salvador. After graduating from high school and coming to the United States, he graduated Magna Cum Laude from Biola University in California, obtaining a Bachelor degree in violin performance. He earned his Master degree from the University of Cincinnati, College-Conservatory of Music and an Artist Diploma from Duquesne University in Pittsburgh.

He was the Director of Strings and Orchestra at Colorado Mesa University and Concertmaster of the Grand Junction Symphony Orchestra for 14 years. He was also Artistic Director and Conductor of the Symphony in the Valley in Glenwood Springs.

He and his wife, pianist Andrea Arese-Elias, gave their New York debut at Weill Hall in Carnegie Hall on March 28, 2002. As the Elias Duo, they have performed extensively in the United States, Japan, Argentina, and El Salvador. Their CD “Let’s Tango” was named “Best of the Best” in the international category on eMusic in the US and the United Kingdom.

He is currently Director of Strings and Orchestra at Cedarville University in Cedarville, Ohio. He is also a member of the first violin section of the Springfield Symphony Orchestra and the conductor of the Springfield Youth Symphony.

About the Valley Symphony Association

Since 1970, the Valley Symphony Association and its orchestra and choir has culturally enriched the community and its members by bringing together some of the best volunteer musicians from the North Fork and Uncompahgre Valleys to discover and perform works of great composers, past and present. Performance styles range from classical orchestral to upbeat pop, from purely instrumental to a combination of orchestra and chorus.