

# RIGHT DIRECTION

## INSIDER

Maestro Raffaele Ponti raises the Punta Gorda Symphony to new levels of virtuosity.

By Chelle Koster Walton

When Raffaele Ponti stepped into the position of music director in Punta Gorda eight seasons ago, the then-named Charlotte Symphony Orchestra consisted of about 35 musicians. People would often confuse the group with the eponymous symphony in Charlotte, North Carolina. Sometimes, guests would mistakenly buy tickets for the wrong performances.

Attendance was nothing to brag about, and the board of directors was determined to shed its community symphony image. “The board charged me with raising the artistic level of the orchestra,” Ponti says. “That’s not just something you learn how to do in school—you have to know how to inspire players for the next level.”

Today, with Ponti at the helm, 70 professional musicians from all over Florida sell out season ticket subscriptions for the recently renamed Punta Gorda Symphony, which performs at Punta Gorda’s Charlotte Performing Arts Center at Charlotte High School. “He’s enhanced the quality of our per-

formances,” board chairman Michael Landsberg says. “Now, we’re gaining regional admiration.”

Going from back-row trumpet player for the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra to the podium, Ponti learned how to make that difference. “You just don’t pick up a baton and wave it,” he says.

His education began when he was growing up in an Italian immigrant household in Rochester, New York. Opera and Italian music were always playing in the house. His parents knew little English at first and found comfort in listening to music in their native tongue.

Their landing in Rochester proved a stroke of luck for young Ponti. Resources like the Sibley Music Library at the Eastman School of Music and the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra steered his career. He began to play in the Rochester orchestra at age 17.

Later, Ponti met two influential mentors: the late, great trumpeter

Ponti led the symphony through its name change last fall, and he's grown the orchestra from 35 to 70 professional guest musicians, while raising the quality of the performances. "That's not just something you learn how to do in school—you have to know how to inspire players for the next level," he says.



**INSIDER**  
ARTIST PROFILE



The charismatic conductor charms audiences with his friendly onstage persona. His clear, expressive and emotionally engaging conducting style has gone a long way in helping the orchestra emerge as a vital part of the region's arts community. "I get people all turned on and excited by the sound," he says.

Courtesy Punta Gorda Symphony/Jerry Beard



**INSIDER**  
ARTIST PROFILE



Ponti recruited talent from all over the state. "It has become really the all-star orchestra of every orchestra in Florida," he says.

Bernard Adelstein, for whom Ponti played assistant principal trumpet, and George Szell, the former conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra. Szell was revered for elevating the symphony to its grand status.

Szell "handpicked all his players," Ponti says. "That's the real recipe for how to make a great orchestra." And it's a recipe he's followed to cook up his ensemble for the Punta Gorda Symphony.

Over the years, Ponti started to gravitate toward conducting, finally making the transition while studying in Italy and touring with an opera company there.

Ponti would study what other conductors brought to the podium, paying close attention to their techniques and mannerisms. In Italy, maestro Giuseppe Sinopoli, of the Conservatorio di Musica Santa Cecilia in Rome, had a big impact on Ponti. Sinopoli, who had also obtained degrees in medicine and archaeology, took an analytical approach to the music. "He felt he had to chip away at all the things to make an orchestra transparent, to hear every note from every different instrument," Ponti says. "It changed my view of conducting and music-making at that moment. It improved my ear immensely. Now I can look at a score and hear it in my head without ever playing it."

When it came time for Ponti to consider the Punta Gorda position, he was also serving as musical director for the Paducah Symphony in Kentucky (a position he still holds) and traveling the world as a guest conductor.

Courtesy Punta Gorda Symphony/Brad Rankin

# CENTER YOURSELF IN THE ARTS

## CENTER FOR VISUAL ARTS

26100 Old 41 Road

Classes For All Ages • Art  
Galleries • National Art Shows  
Studios for Painting • Clay  
Drawing • Sculpture • Pottery  
Printmaking • Glass • Jewelry

## CENTER FOR PERFORMING ARTS

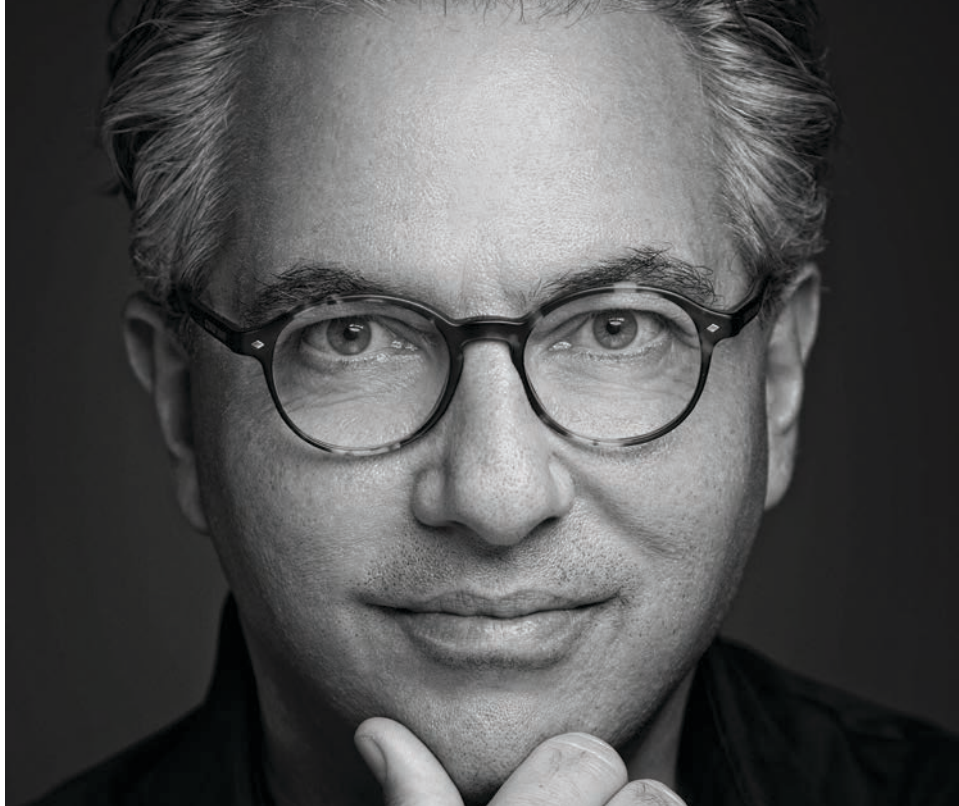
10150 Bonita Beach Road

Weekly Foreign Films • Plays  
Music • Concerts • Acting  
Classes • Youth Programs



**TWO CENTERS  
ONE MISSION  
ARTS FOR ALL**

**artcenterbonita.org  
239.495.8989**



With Ponti wielding the baton, the Punta Gorda Symphony is continuing to gain renown. “He’s enhanced the quality of our performances,” board chairman Michael Landsberg says. “Now, we’re gaining regional admiration.”

But he had a vision for the Punta Gorda Symphony. He knew there would be growing pains and that every aspect would have to change to meet that vision. Ponti pushed onward and moved his musical family (wife, Isabelle Aubin, is a pianist and vocalist with the symphony, while daughter Sophia majors in the viola at Stetson School of Music).

He proceeded slowly, establishing himself as a personality in the community, and took cues from winter visitors looking for the equivalent of the high-caliber music they’d left at home. His energy and professionalism built the symphony’s presence to its current crescendo. “Our audiences love his charisma and friendly banter from the stage,” Landsberg says.

But there’s more to Ponti than a charming persona. Contemporaries praise his expressive style. “I get people all turned on and excited by the sound,” the conductor says. “Then my staff goes in. I like to ‘friendraise.’ They like to fundraise.”

In building the ensemble, Ponti recruited talent from Naples and Miami, all the way to Jacksonville. “It has become really the all-star orchestra of every orchestra in Florida,” he says.

He recruits guest players in for single shows or series; sometimes, they’ll stay on for the entire season. “We hear over and over from the musicians how much they enjoy working with him,” Landsberg says.

As far as growing his local patron base, education has been key. “Making the symphony relevant to the community is very important to me,” Ponti says. He has initiated programs,

Courtesy Punta Gorda Symphony/Brad Rankin



# SUPPORT.

Busey's right beside you.

We're here to support your dreams. For over 150 years, Busey has promised close relationships with our associates, customers and communities to fulfill them.

And right now, we're at the ready to support our neighbors and vibrant communities, offering financial relief for those in need. Visit [busey.com/financialreliefprogram](https://busey.com/financialreliefprogram) or contact our team at 1.800.67Busey to learn more.

**Busey. Honored to Support Our Communities.**

[busey.com](https://busey.com)  
239.790.8000 Member FDIC

**Busey**BANK®


## INSIDER

### ARTIST PROFILE

such as Behind The Notes classes, in which students critique recordings of different conductors leading the same piece of music; and Youth Concert, a collaboration with Carnegie Hall that brings third graders in Charlotte County to the orchestra's venue for interactive classes.

What does Ponti foresee for the Punta Gorda Symphony? The season that was scheduled to begin Nov. 22 has moved to 2021-2022. "People are starving for quality entertainment," he says. "I feel the symphony is going to be better and more important to people's lives than ever before. It's certainly better than watching TV."

For the first time, the symphony is hosting two piano recitals, one featuring Thomas Pandolfi, and the other with Stewart Goodyear. A Chamber Music Series of performances and Young Composer Competition are in the offing, too.

In the long range, Ponti looks forward to moving the performances to a new symphony hall, though a site has not been chosen, and he aims to continue elevating the music. "Just because it's a smaller city, it doesn't have to be a smaller orchestra in quality," he says. 



## The Joel Shapses Studio and Gallery

### CONTEMPORARY SCULPTURE

Fused Glass Stone and Metal Sculptures by award-winning internationally acclaimed sculptor  
**Joel Shapses**

### CONTEMPORARY PAINTINGS

Mixed media of watercolor, acid ink and acrylic paintings by **Richard Diedrich**

Oils and watercolor painting and stoneware by **Joan Eshkenazi**

**Located in the Fairways Trade Village** by appointment

6240 Shirley Street suite 102 | Naples, FL 34109

**954-830-3156** | [www.joelshapsesstudio.com](http://www.joelshapsesstudio.com)

**404-307-6828** | [www.richarddiedrichartist.com](http://www.richarddiedrichartist.com)

**917-364-9836** | [www.joaneshkenazi.com](http://www.joaneshkenazi.com)