

Changing the Tempo

A dynamic new leadership team scores a new movement for Santa Fe Pro Musica

BY MARK TIARKS



■ Pro Musica Artistic Director Colin Jacobsen (right) and his recently appointed colleague, Executive Director Daniel James, are combining their various talents to lead the organization into the next era. Opposite page: As an aspiring young performer growing up in rural Wisconsin, James studied flute at the Interlochen Center for the Arts and the Juilliard School of Music and then played professionally for several years in Italy, including two seasons at Venice's Teatro La Fenice.

When the pandemic began, if someone had told me that Santa Fe Pro Musica would not only survive, but emerge from it with Colin Jacobsen as artistic director and the recently appointed Daniel James as executive director, I'd have assumed they'd been eating the funny mushrooms.

Jacobsen is one of the most high-profile violinists on the American music scene. The graduate of the Juilliard School and the Royal Conservatory of the Hague is a co-founder and member of the Brooklyn Rider string quartet and The Knights chamber orchestra, as well as a member of Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road project since it was founded in 2002.

James began his career as a professional flutist, studying at the Juilliard School and then performing for several years with orchestras and opera companies in Italy. In 2015 he transitioned to management, serving as Houston Grand Opera's associate director of artistic planning for seven years and then as Santa Fe Opera's director of artistic planning for three seasons.

With any luck, their appointments will end one of the longest and most challenging leadership transitions in the Santa Fe performing arts scene's history. (See "Pro Musica's Epic Journey" for a timeline.)

It's a calculated risk for James, who has become Pro Musica's fifth executive director in the last eight years.

So why leave a higher-profile, better-funded organization after a relatively short tenure for one that has always lived close to the edge? "I felt it was my time to take a chance and try to spread my wings," James says.

He knew that his next logical career step would be as an executive or general director in a smaller organization.

"I knew I wasn't going to be plucked out of thin air to go run La Scala," he says. "That's just not realistic. But when all the pieces came together with Pro Musica, it felt like this was the right time and the right place. And I love being in Santa Fe, so that's a huge plus."

James' path to his new gig didn't follow the traditional route; it came by making a backstage visit at the right time and place.

In April 2025, soprano Ariadne Greif, a college classmate, sang here on a Pro Musica program with Brooklyn Rider. After the concert, Thomas O'Connor (Pro Musica's co-founder, longtime artistic director, and until recently its acting executive director), noticed James speaking with Greif.

"I had a feeling about him, just from that moment," O'Connor says. "There was something about the way he carried himself and the way that he pays attention that really made an impression on me."

James adds, "He asked Ariadne to put the two of us together. About a week later, he reached out to me, and I knew in my gut what he wanted to talk about." After the two had some exploratory discussions, James was definitely interested in seriously considering the possibility once the opera season ended.

A more formal interview process with Pro Musica's search committee took place in the fall, and his appointment was announced in late November. "I think he's a natural," says C. Fish Greenfield, the group's board president. "He's an extrovert, he gets out in the community on a regular basis, and he's very well connected [through his work at the opera]."

Asked whether the board had any major concerns that James' expertise, like Jacobsen's, is in the artistic arena, Greenfield says, "You know, that's not really something that I was even concerned about once I met him."

"I asked him about some of the challenges he had to deal with at the opera, which is a much larger, more complex organization, and some of his examples were great. I just can't repeat them."



Another Pro Musica board member had first-hand experience working with James — David Holloway, the distinguished American baritone who ran the Santa Fe Opera's apprentice program for singers from 2005 to 2018.

James, who was then considering a transition from flute performance to arts management, had a summer appointment as Holloway's assistant in 2013 and 2014.

In a letter to his fellow Pro Musica board members, Holloway described James as "energetic, friendly, and personable," going on to praise how skillfully he organized all the performances by the apprentices that took place in various community venues over the summer.

"He's so outgoing and people oriented, he's a natural at fundraising, and his musical background will make him doubly effective," Holloway tells *Pasatiempo*. "Plus, at a nominating committee meeting yesterday, I was amazed by how well organized Daniel was, and by how much he knew about many of the board candidates we were discussing."

James says his priorities for the first few months in his new function are learning who everybody is within the organization and observing how things currently happen: "Then I think, 'This is totally fine,' or 'This doesn't really work, but we can deal with it later,' or 'This isn't working, and we need to deal with this right now.'"

He has joined an organization that has less in the "deal with this right now" category than it did not too long ago. Pro Musica has made significant financial progress over the last three fiscal years, thanks to increased revenue from both performance admissions and contributions.

The number of tickets sold and the income for the current season have already surpassed the totals for all of last year, with six performances still to take place this spring.

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Santa Fe Pro Musica's Epic Journey

1980: Oboist Thomas O'Connor and flutist Carol Redman co-founded Ensemble of Santa Fe to perform chamber music and early music in and around Santa Fe, with O'Connor as its artistic director.

1994: Ensemble of Santa Fe changes its name to Santa Fe Pro Musica and adds orchestra concerts to its offerings.

2014: Pro Musica and Music from Angel Fire, a summer-only chamber music organization, decide to share office space and administrative staff, including Elizabeth Harcombe, the latter group's executive director, as part of a plan to merge the two groups.

2015: In a September *Pasatiempo* interview, O'Connor said he had been in discussion with the organization's board of directors about the issue of succession, which he described as "really important to me."

2016: The affiliation arrangement with Music from Angel Fire ends; Harcombe stays with Pro Musica as executive director.

2018: Pro Musica begins engaging guest conductors as a means of auditioning successors to O'Connor, with an anticipated starting date of fall 2021.

2019: Harcombe resigns from Pro Musica.

2020: Mary Madigan joins Pro Musica as its executive director in February and pianist Anne-Marie McDermott is announced as its new artistic director in May. A few months later, unlike most performing arts groups, which began producing online content as the extent of the pandemic became clear, Pro Musica adopts a "wait it out and conserve as much cash as possible" strategy, and lays off most of its staff, including Madigan.

2021: Andréa Cassutt joins Pro Musica as its executive director in August.

2022: McDermott resigns in April. In September, violinist and frequent Pro Musica guest performer Colin Jacobsen is announced as the group's new music director.

2023: Cassutt resigns in May. In June, O'Connor is named interim executive director.

2025: In November Daniel James is announced as the group's next executive director, effective January 5, 2026.



KERRY SHERCK

SOPHIE ZHAI

GABRIELA CAMPOS/NEW MEXICAN FILE PHOTO

■ Top to bottom: Thomas O'Connor and flutist Carol Redman, Anne-Marie McDermott, and Andréa Cassutt figure prominently in the Pro Musica timeline.

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The overall fiscal turnaround is perhaps even more impressive. In its 2023 fiscal year, Pro Musica had an operating deficit of almost \$369,000, which reduced its net worth to \$116,000. In 2024, the books showed an enormous improvement, with the operating deficit reduced by more than \$300,000, leaving it with \$65,000 in the bank. The group's 2025 audit is expected to show a surplus of around \$95,000, which will rebuild its net worth to about \$160,000.

The personable Jacobsen was just as impressed with James as were others who met with him during the search process.

"I think marketing and fundraising really come down to communication skills and people skills, and also understanding the music that motivates the organization," he says, "then being able to put that into words and to share passion and enthusiasm, which Daniel will be able to do in droves."

"I just felt like this was truly a person I could partner with and bring Pro Musica into the future."

When asked about what he hoped they could accomplish over a three-to-five year horizon, Jacobsen says, "I would hope that the word in town and beyond is 'What is Santa Fe Pro Musica going to do next?' and 'Whatever it is, I want to be there.' That and having a little bit more of a nest egg so we can plan further out."

In a sign of increased confidence in the organization's ability to make longer-term artistic plans, Jacobsen and James will announce a three-year initiative called Democratic Vistas. The title is from an 1871 prose essay by Walt Whitman in which he decried the spiritual and ethical failures of a country obsessed with the creation of wealth and rampant consumerism, which led to a sense of societal fragmentation and a political system "saturated in corruption, bribery, falsehood, [and] mal-administration."

He then posited the remedy as an ennobling expansion of the country's arts and literature, a concept reflected in Pro Musica's plan to perform the nine Beethoven symphonies over three seasons, juxtaposed with historic American works and commissions that explore some of Whitman's major themes.

Jacobsen says it feels like a dream to be able to work with an executive director who was already in Santa Fe and sees their partnership as "the natural successor" to that of O'Connor and Carol Redman, the group's co-founder and associate artistic director.

And what does the future hold for O'Connor with the organization? He no longer attends committee meetings, most of which deal with operational issues, but sees board recruitment as an area where he can continue to make a significant contribution, thanks to his long involvement with the company and the community.

The group's new leadership configuration does bring a new personal challenge to the 78-year-old O'Connor, who acknowledges it with good humor: "I have to fight the urge to express my opinion about everything, which isn't helpful any longer."

But Santa Fe's music-loving community can appreciate O'Connor's contributions, as it was his tenacity that kept Pro Musica alive during the pandemic and its aftermath. And for most of his tenure as acting executive director, he worked either pro bono or on a partial salary.

"I think I'll have a role, as a board member, but I'm very aware of not getting in the way," he says. "I want Daniel to run the organization and to be successful." ◀

Mark Tiarks attended Carleton College, studied opera and theater in London as a Watson Foundation fellow, then served in leadership positions with Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, Chicago's Court Theater, Chicago Opera Theater, and the Santa Fe Opera.