

PROMOTING THE PERFORMING ARTS IN NEW ORLEANS

Mariah Forde takes on dual role with the local opera and symphony

By Dean M. Shapiro, Senior Editor



PHOTO COURTESY OF MARIAH FORDE

Handling publicity and media relations for even one of New Orleans' major cultural organizations would be challenging enough, let alone two of them. But Mariah Forde is up to the challenge and she has hit the ground running.

A recent arrival to New Orleans from her former home in Miami, Mariah is the Assistant Director of Communications for the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra and the New Orleans Opera Association, a dual role newly and specifically created for her three months ago.

According to a joint statement issued by both organizations, Mariah will work in tandem with them “to construct strategic communications plans that promote and enhance the organizations’ brands.” A large part of her mission will include “working closely with both executive leadership teams to curate forward-thinking narratives that educate, engage, and inspire communities in New Orleans and beyond through media relations and organizational storytelling.”

In a recent exclusive interview, Mariah told Breakthru Media magazine, “I’m excited for the challenge of being in a brand new market. But I’m even more excited being here in New Orleans because New Orleans is just a special city. There are a lot of cultural gems here, both hidden and in plain view. Coming from Miami to New Orleans is proving to be a great experience in learning the culture and the way the city works. This is a very special opportunity I don’t think I could get anywhere else and I’m really thrilled.”

Mariah’s prior experiences helped lay the groundwork for the objectives she optimistically plans to achieve for both the LPO and NOOA. Her previous job in Miami was Public Relations and Social Media Manager with the New World Symphony, widely known as “America’s Orchestral Academy,” whose mission is “to prepare graduates of music programs for leadership roles in professional orchestras and ensembles around the world.”

With the disappearance or shrinking of



Mariah with trumpeter/composer Terence Blanchard

traditional print and visual media coverage of the cultural arts nationwide, visionaries like Mariah have begun focusing on social media as a primary outlet for publicizing those arts groups and their events. While at NWS, Mariah facilitated local and national media relations efforts to promote the academy’s initiatives and she led the development and execution of NWS’s social media communications strategies.

Under her leadership, NWS’s social media initiative reported a 30 percent audience increase and she expanded the organization’s digital footprint in other ways. She also established new partnerships that resulted in first-ever media coverage within Miami’s sizable African American and Caribbean communities.

Prior to that position, Mariah held key posts at two other cultural and performing arts organizations in the Miami-Dade region and she was the recipient of several prestigious awards for her accomplishments, especially within the Black and Latinx communities.

“Public relations is a transferrable skill that can benefit any industry,” Mariah said. “The key is using storytelling to make the



Mariah with New Orleans artist PJ Morton

connection of shared values between you and your audience. That’s how you build and maintain investment.”

Mariah’s story begins in the Washington, DC suburb of Germantown, Maryland. With a father who works as a regional director for Kaiser Permanente, a mother who’s a business and travel consultant and a twin sister named Aleisha, Mariah enjoyed a childhood of music lessons, horseback riding and other fulfilling pastimes that would later factor into her chosen career. These also included singing with Washington Performing Arts’ Children of the Gospel Choir in the world-renowned John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

“My sister and I had fun with our names as we were growing up,” Mariah laughed. “She was Alicia Keys because she played the piano, even though her name was spelled differently, and I was Mariah Carey.”

Mariah began her college career as a vocal performance major at Howard University and then transferred to the University of Miami in Florida where she received her music business and entertainment degree. From there she moved on to

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an online Master's degree in communications management from the University of Southern California.

"Throughout college I knew I wanted to be in the entertainment industry. I just didn't know exactly what it was that I wanted to do," Mariah explained. "I worked full time while doing the online program for USC and then we went into the pandemic, which gave me the opportunity to really focus on my schoolwork. While in the program, there were a few courses on public relations. These were the courses that made me light up the most, and so I said, 'Okay, this is what I want to do' and I've been doing it ever since."

So what are Mariah's plans for promoting the opera and the symphony companies in New Orleans? For starters she envisions devoting an equal amount of time to both organizations, despite the fact that NOOA only hosts four mainstage operas in a season and a few smaller events while the LPO presents 50-60 concerts and special musical events in that same time period. The two organizations usually come together four times a year when the philharmonic accompanies the opera productions.

Mariah has already begun reaching out to the print and visual media in New Orleans and within the Gulf South region from which the two arts organizations traditionally draw audience members. However, she is also looking beyond these traditional publicity avenues and is reaching out to local podcasters, social media influencers and bloggers with large followings. "This is where many people are getting their information these days," she said.

In addition, she has been meeting with and listening to outreach suggestions from longtime arts aficionados and patrons in the community and formulating plans to act on their most potentially productive recommendations.

Between her efforts and those of others to reach out to the city's young people and minority communities, those efforts appear

to be bearing fruit. Ticket revenues are increasing and new audiences are coming to the organizations' performance venues. The final opera production of the 2022-23 season, Giacomo Puccini's "Madame Butterfly," at the 3,000-plus seat Mahalia Jackson Theater was a near-sellout, drawing in possibly the opera company's largest audience since the late 1990s.

Wrapping up the hour-long interview, Mariah reiterated "What a tremendous honor it is to be called on to increase visibility and excitement for not just one, but two of New Orleans' musical powerhouses.

The Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra and the New Orleans Opera Association are taking significant strides to expand their reach and impact in the community, and this newly created role that I'm in is a pivotal step towards achieving this goal."

Mariah Forde welcomes feedback from the community, especially suggestions on how to better enhance visibility of the two performing arts forms. She can be reached at (240) 506-7789 or at either of two email addresses: mforde@neworleansopera.org or mariah.forde@lpomusic.com



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