

Miami Symphony Orchestra's big plans focus of glitzy gala

By Zachary S. Fagenson

The Miami Symphony Orchestra's Past, Present and Future Gala Saturday night had all the trappings of a Miami fundraiser.

Valets scampered between imported cars, champagne glasses clinked and guests perused high-end items for a \$250-a-ticket raffle.

But no one found their way to the party through a Miami Beach hotel's lobby.

Instead, they ventured to Ice Palace Film Studios, a blindingly white warehouse surrounded by graffiti-covered buildings just north of downtown Miami.

And as the building began filling, Maestro Eduardo Marturet said the symphony has big plans for its next season, including a handful of performances in the New World Symphony's new Miami Beach home designed by famed architect Frank Gehry.

"The orchestra has been changing over the last year," he said. "The new season, as you see in the brochure, is much bigger" than years past.

The symphony is also planning an international tour "at the end of next season," Mr. Marturet added.

And it seems the symphony isn't the only institution in town looking to take its act on the road.

A new crop of students recently graduated from Florida International University's hospitality school's outpost in Tianjin, China, and the school could soon become even more involved in that country, according to President Mark Rosenberg.

"We've been invited by the Qingdao city government to develop a wine and food festival," he said.

The event would be a partnership between FIU and the Qingdao government and is planned for May 2011, he noted.

And while "cautiously optimistic" seems to be the phrase of choice for most when asked about their outlook for the economy, some business owners were quick to point out bright spots.

"Everybody saw a severe decline [in demand] at the end of 2009," said Joseph DeMaria, CEO of TruckMax Inc., which sells everything from refrigerated trucks to dump trucks. "People reacted by cutting their overhead."

But in recent months Mr. DeMaria said he's seeing strong sales in garbage trucks and landscaping trucks.

Additionally, he said, Haiti, which will be in recovery mode well into the foreseeable future, has also generated a lot of demand along with other international markets.

And Miami-based TotalBank is also preparing for growth.

"We're hiring right now," said Chairman Jorge Rossell.

The bank, he added, hired about 45 employees last year and is implementing a customer-relationship management program to help achieve its goal of making branches the core of business development.

Meanwhile, finding pockets of demand has proved indispensable across a range of other industries.

"I don't compete with Univision," said Luis Villanueva, president and CEO of Somos TV.

The company runs two 24-hour pay channels offering movies and children's programming that "complement the Spanish-language television and it's booming," he added.

And with all the competition for viewers' eyes and advertising dollars, SocialMiami.com Publisher Aaron Glickman said he has staff pushing into new areas.

"We're doing an original series creating local content," he said.

Rather than try to get airspace on television, Mr. Glickman said the website created a fashion-themed reality show that appears on the Internet as web video.

"We're collaborating with advertisers, creating advertiser-sponsored content," he added. "And we're doing more of those."

And it seems the recession's impact on cosmetic surgery was short-lived compared to other industries.

Last year "people were pulling back on the more expensive treatments," said Dr. Julio Gallo, medical director at The Miami Institute for Age Management and Intervention.

But that's changed recently.

"Jan. 1 was a radical change for us and so far this year it's [been] great," he added.

Others, especially those in real estate and development, said there's still work to be done to recover from the economic collapse.

"We're trying to reposition" our portfolio, said Rodman Drake, CEO of New York-based real estate investment trust Crystal River Capital. "We've got to sell some assets, get rid of some debt."

Mr. Drake said his firm won't be looking at investing in projects in Miami in the near future.

But not everyone has cold feet.

BBB Group President Jose Baboun said his company is working on a project in Miami that "isn't residential and isn't commercial" and expressed that cautious optimism in gauging the recovery of the sector locally.

"I don't think that it will come back like it used to be," he said, "but Miami is growing."

And despite all the challenges, Miami hasn't lost its love for a good party.

"Right now we're doing" well, said Knapp Winery CEO Dan Knapp.

And while alcohol may be cheaper to buy in a liquor store, Mr. Knapp said he's seeing a spike in demand from nightclubs throughout South Florida.

"We supply nightclubs from Palm Beach to South Beach, and they're doing well."