

## Artist's music-inspired paintings benefit Memphis Symphony Orchestra



Photos by Jon W. Sparks/Special to The Commercial Appeal  
Milisa Valliere, who is married to Memphis Symphony Orchestra  
CEO Roland Valliere, is a painter whose works are inspired by  
particular pieces of music. A painting based on Beethoven's Fifth

Symphony is being auctioned with proceeds to help the MSO stay afloat financially.



“Everybody knows those first four notes,” artist Milisa Valliere says of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, which inspired her painting “Fate Knocking at the Door.” “I knew I had to nail it.”

Artists always have something stirring inside — a tune, a poem, an image, a performance.

As personal as that expression is, what gives it life is almost always a connection to another, even a collaboration.

Such synergies are at work in an exhibition of work by Milisa Valliere that opens Friday at Gallery 363 on South Main Street.

Valliere is a painter whose parents were painters. Growing up, they moved all around, to places where they wanted to paint. She picked it up naturally.

But a variety of other influences have shaped her work: her husband, music, the financial situation of the Memphis Symphony Orchestra. And they’re all connected.

Husband Roland Valliere has been president and CEO of the MSO since November. He's working to keep the symphony afloat as it faces an uncertain future because of money woes.

There's been a whirlwind of fundraising activity since the MSO's situation was [publicly reported in January](#). Donors large and small have contributed, and much of the effort to gather support has come from the orchestra's musicians.

The Vallieres also wanted to help and decided that one of Milisa's pieces would be auctioned with all proceeds going to the MSO.

But it's not just any painting. It's a particular work made with a particular process that Milisa and Roland have developed. These days, all of her works are done as she listens to music. Not background noise, mind you. She listens purposefully to a particular composition and paints what she hears.

"I paint fast and usually to music loud, most any kind — rock, classical, world, blues, jazz," she says. "It fuels my work and frees my mind to create without judgment."

And how does she choose the music? Often enough, she doesn't. Roland does.

"I have 175,000 songs in my library," he says. "It would take 565 consecutive 24-hour days to listen to all of them."

He started making playlists for her. Typically, she'd gather her brushes and paints, and then plug in the iPod. Whatever music he'd chosen that came out of the speaker she'd put on canvas or board.

For this piece, however, she knew which music she'd be listening to. It would be Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, and there were a couple of strongly connected reasons for it.

For one thing, it's a favorite of MSO music director Mei-Ann Chen. She conducted it with the MSO during her 2009 audition for the top job here. Ditto with the Chicago Sinfonietta — Chen is also its music director and conducted the piece in her first concert there in 2011.

Now it's going to be performed again during the Masterworks concerts on May 3 and 4.

"Everybody knows those first four notes," Milisa says. "I knew I had to nail it. It's a fantastic journey; you start hearing everything and seeing the ocean and a battle; there's light and dark. I painted it three times before it was finished."

Roland has been providing her with music for some years now, since he was executive director of the Kansas City Symphony and later president of the Columbus (Ohio) Symphony Orchestra.

"Sometimes I'll choose the music based on a legacy event," he

says, “like the release date of Miles Davis’ ‘Kind of Blue’ or the anniversary of the premiere of Beethoven’s ‘Eroica’ or Leopold Stokowski’s birthday.”

And sometimes, he says, it’s a wild card. Since coming to Memphis, Milisa has been painting to “Hellhound on my Trail” by Robert Johnson and visiting the Stax Museum of American Soul Music, Sun Studio and the Memphis Rock ‘n’ Soul Museum. Last week in Milisa’s home studio, the Vallieres were pondering the sounds of 9Bach, a folk indie band from Wales. If it’s music, it’s fodder for a possible Milisa Valliere painting.

She paints fast, and she paints often. But it wasn’t always so. About six years ago, Milisa was blocked. She got out of it when she played Bob Dylan’s “Time Out of Mind” — “I could paint only when that was on.”

And then she went into overdrive, painting 100 works in 100 days. “That was my ‘Fast & Furious’ period,” she says.

Later, when Roland left Columbus, they acquired an Airstream trailer and traveled for 14 months, going some 30,000 miles around the country. “It was 187 square feet,” Milisa says. And a very different experience, relying on people they met on the road and keeping things to the essentials.

And always painting to the music.

The Beethoven Fifth-inspired artwork, titled “Fate Knocking at the Door,” and several others will be on display at 363 Gallery, a space which is curated by Jay Etkin at the Leadership Memphis offices on South Main.

“She’s expressive, like an action painter,” Etkin says. “It’s very physical, and that physicality is in the work, but it’s a gentle quality.”

The work, he says, is in the moment and coming through her hand. “You can see the marks she’s making. You see the energetic movement of brush strokes. The work is very much a representation of her experience with the music.”

Bidding has already reached \$4,000. Bids, which are being taken in increments of \$500, can be made by calling the MSO Box Office at 901-537-2500. Bids can also be made in person during the concerts on May 3 and 4. Bids must be placed by 11:59 p.m. May 4.

### **‘Inspired by Music’**

Paintings by Milisa Valliere, Friday through May 25 at Gallery 363 at Leadership Memphis, 363 South Main. More information: 901-537-2500 and [mvalliere.com](http://mvalliere.com).