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Neighborhood Week
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Teens find orchestra rewarding, even if it ruins social life

By Eric Minton

Professor Peter Schickele was not too keen about working with kids. But he was stuck with them, specifically members of the Oklahoma Youth Orchestra.

Schickele is the internationally known conductor, composer and comedian whose discovery and study of the works of Johann Sebastian Bach's 21st son, known as P.D.Q. Bach — his father never bothered to give him a name — is one of the best comedy acts and satires on classical music ever produced. Last spring he brought the music of this "pimple on the face of music" to Oklahoma City for a concert to benefit the Oklahoma Youth Orchestra.

The Oklahoma Youth Orchestra is a group of about 100 musicians, between the ages of 14 and 18, selected from all over the state through auditions. They served as Schickele's orchestra for the concert.

Schickele had his doubts if it would work. To play P.D.Q. Bach well with all the nuances of satire and the music's constant breaks, tune and key changes, diversions and lunacy, requires adept playing and professionalism. Schickele's standards are hard for professional orchestras to meet, let alone a group of high school kids.

But he didn't know what he was really up against until the dress rehearsal. At one point in the concert, in the middle of a piece, Schickele argues with his union stage manager, as part of his skit, who insists it's time for the orchestra to pack up. Schickele orders the stage manager off the stage and continues conducting. Then the lights go out, briefly stopping the concert, the union thus making its point.

The scene worked beautifully in rehearsal, except that the players didn't stop. They had learned the piece so well and were unaware of the skit that when the lights went out, they continued playing until Schickele stopped them, shouting: "No, stop playing. You're not supposed to be able to see the music, so you can't play."

They got it right for the concert, along with everything else. Schickele was so pleased with the Oklahoma Youth Orchestra he sent the group a letter commending them for their talent, professionalism and outstanding performance.

That was last year's Oklahoma Youth Orchestra.

This year's orchestra is even better, says both conductor Leigh W. Burns and associate conductor Edmund Williams.

"This is the best one yet," says Burns of the orchestra he started seven years ago and has conducted ever since. "Every year it gets better. I don't know why, but it does."

Then Burns says, with no hint of hyperbole, "This is the best non-professional orchestra I've ever conducted."

Burns is a professor of music at the University of Oklahoma and conductor of the University Symphony Orchestra and the Chamber Orchestra. He also is music director of the Oklahoma's Summer Arts Institute.

His career is a distinguished one, especially with youth groups. He started as first trumpet of the U.S. Air Force Band and was a member of the USAF Symphony Orchestra in Washington, D.C., both prestigious, world class musical units. Among his teaching jobs was a post with the University of Denver, where he founded the National Trumpet Symposium in 1968 and the Festival Chamber



Scenes from a Oklahoma Youth Orchestra rehearsal on the University of Oklahoma campus. Director Leigh Burns is in left center photo and Edmund Williams in in lower left photo.

Orchestra.

Burns came to OU in 1978, looked around the state and saw ample reason and opportunity to start a youth orchestra. "There were a number of small pockets of ability," he says — "good players, but without an orchestra offered in their school. I felt a youth orchestra would give them a chance to develop their abilities, and it might encourage some schools to start an orchestra."

After four years of coordination with schools and arts groups, Burns founded the Oklahoma Youth Orchestra, based in Norman. His praise of this year's orchestra thus comes with expertise and experience.

So does the praise given the group by Williams, who rates some sections of the orchestra alongside professionals. "A lot of time when you're conducting or listening to them, you forget it's an amateur orchestra," he says.

Williams is a professor of music at Southwest Oklahoma State University and conductor of that college's orchestra.

He met Burns in the Air Force and helped him land the OU job. Williams has conducted all levels of orchestras throughout the country, including stints with the Oklahoma Symphony Orchestra.

Their proteges are 106 students with homes as far away as Muskogee, Weath-

erford, Lawton and Stillwater — 26 towns represented in all. After auditions, each member pays a \$100 membership fee, then gives up every Saturday morning, and hence most Friday nights, to practice in Norman from 9 a.m. to noon.

The sacrifice would seem great, but it's probably harder on the parents who drive the kids than on the musicians who turn their back on a normal teen-age social life.

"This is my social life," says Sharon Clark, 15, a violinist from Shawnee High School in her second year, with the orchestra. The bright-eyed, effervescent virtuoso practices about seven hours a week on her music, typical of the musicians in this group.

"It's changed my social life unbelievably," says Brent Lively, 18, of Yukon, a student at Mustang High School and violinist in the Oklahoma Youth Orchestra. "Most of my friends are the partying type, staying out 'til 2 or 3 in the morning just running around. This gave me an excuse to get away from them."

A former football player sidelined by injury and now in his first year with the orchestra, Lively says of the new experience: "It's changed my life completely. It helps, especially if you've got bad-off friends."

Lively and his colleagues have a healthy respect and love for each other. Their only complaint about being in the orchestra, it seems, is that they don't get to chat with each other much. They are all colleagues, and the only peer pressure is on each member to give their best effort as musicians.

"This is just a real good group of kids," Lively says. "I don't think there's one person that smokes or dips here."

"When you're in the orchestra, you're already accepted," says Brenda Lea, 17, a third-year violinist from Putnam City High School. "You don't have to do queer stuff like that."

However, in many ways, these are typical teens. Near the end of a rehearsal break, a group of girls in the violin section shout in unison on the count of three the name of a boy elsewhere in the orchestra. Then they all crouch and giggle. Blue jeans are the typical wear and rock 'n' roll is a typical favorite to listen to.

But not to play. As the orchestra learned music from Broadway, Andrew Lloyd Weber, the rock group Toto and other popular numbers to play at a special dinner benefit, the general consensus among the members was that the music was "boring."

Give them Brahms' "Hungarian Dance No. 1" or Handel's "Concerto for Viola and Strings," or Kodaly's "Suite from Hary Janos" or Dvorak's "New World Symphony." As they rehearsed Gustav Holst's "The Planets" for the first time, the horn section jived as if they were in a rock band.

Burns' selection of music is doubly significant for the kids. "The first criteria is to get something that excites the kids, that lights a fire in them," he says. "The second is to give them standard repertoire pieces. If they going to have an advantage with being in this orchestra, I would hope it's their ability to play music which is standard repertoire for most orchestras."

"I'm proud, from a professional standpoint, that we do the repertoire we do." Standard, maybe, but the music these kids are playing is among the most difficult.

It does pay off, though. When cellist Allison Yee, 17, of Putnam City High School joined the orchestra five years ago, she contends now. "I was the worst player. I had to ask the person next to me where we were in the piece."

She hung in, though, using the old practice of "if you can't play it, fake it." Faking was quickly behind her, and now in her final year, Yee is heading for Baylor University with a scholarship, a position in the Baylor Quartet and in the Waco Symphony. "They were amazed at my repertoire," she says simply.

Strong repertoire and new friends aren't all the orchestra members get out of all this. They get the chance to play with professionals, such as last year's P.D.Q. Bach concert, which not only was difficult for the group to learn, but was also fun. They also get to travel, not just around the state, but around the world. Every three years the Oklahoma Youth Orchestra visits a foreign country: Mexico in 1978, China in 1981, Scandinavia next August.

"I want this to be the most encompassing thing these kids can do in high school," Burns says. "Musically, socially and educationally, and part of that is to travel."

Their tour of Scandinavia will include several concerts, sightseeing and shopping ventures and staying in homes. The kids, naturally, are quite excited about the trip, raising money as best they can. And if their trip to China is any indication, which Burns describes as "explosive ... They loved us," then Oklahoma will be well-represented by this group of kids visiting in Sweden, Norway and Denmark.

But it won't be all fun for the kids. Burns keeps a disciplined hand over this group. "He doesn't like goofing off," says

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Clark. "If you do . . ." Her expression makes it clear what would happen.

"I went on the China trip," Lea says, "and people on the plane going over were amazed that 100 high school kids on a trip could be so quiet on the plane. We didn't want to mess up."

Nevertheless, these kids respect and love Burns and Williams. They follow the conductors' directions in rehearsals, everything from "no talking" to "more vibrato, please."

Once, when Burns strolled into the room to give instructions to the orchestra after a performance in rehearsal, the kids applauded.

At the start of another rehearsal, concert mistress Suzie Kim of Lawton stands up, presumably to direct the oboe to start the orchestra's tuning. Instead, in an obvious conspiracy, the whole orches-

tra begins singing "Happy Birthday" to Williams, who, after a sheepish grin, starts directing the orchestra in the singing.

The three-hour Saturday morning rehearsals aren't always sweatshops. Despite strict rules and professional standards used by both conductors, the rehearsals are fun. Williams is full of quips and puns when he gives instructions:

"Trumpets, you've got the melody there. It sounds more like a malady back there."

"This starts with a roll, timpani, so I need a roll from you — cinnamon roll, sweet roll, whatever, as long as it's with crescendo."

Burns drives the group through new music unflinchingly. In many rehearsals, the kids are seeing the music for the first time, but since they are adept at sight-reading music, Burns works on the

pieces' nuances and tempo without worrying about notes. Individual practice will handle the notes. Still, the first time out, few missed notes are noticeable, especially among the strings.

Movements drag on as Burns constantly stops the music with a clap of his hands or a tap of his baton, giving instructions like: "I heard a crescendo for the first beat, then a plateau. I need a tremendous crescendo. Let me make that clearer: Get louder!"

Rarely does he have to repeat instructions in a piece.

Shortly after starting a movement of the Kodaly piece, Burns abruptly stops the orchestra. "I don't think you can play it much better than that," he tells them. "That was excellent. Now, keep it tight."

Hard work and sacrifice by both the orchestra and the conductors — Burns' first concern in starting the orchestra was giving up his Saturdays, something

the kids readily do — results in one of the nation's finest youth orchestras, if not in performance at least in behavior.

In performance, though, this group, struggling along strictly on membership fees and private donations, can hold its own. Their music is exciting and played with keen interest, ability and style. Their next public performance is scheduled for May 20 at the Civic Center in Oklahoma City.

But teens have the greatest concern for the here and now. Careers have yet to start, and fame is far away. Traveling to distant countries in the distant future, for a teen-ager, isn't enough to hold their attention. What they need is something here and now, and the Oklahoma Youth Orchestra obviously provides that, too.

Says Williams, "They come here expecting something to happen. It must be happening — otherwise, they wouldn't be coming back every week."

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