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Orchestra personnel managers: enabling the musicians to do their best

With Ron Simon and Sande Gillette's recent retirement as personnel managers of the orchestra, some people are wishing for a way to "download" into a reliable computer program the vast supply of musician-related information in the former managers' memories. Much of the mind-boggling detail associated with the personnel jobs is stored only in their heads.

Managing while performing full-time

Ron and Sande have had extraordinarily demanding dual roles: Ron has been personnel manager for the past 23 years as well as a member of the bass section for 46 years, and Sande has served as assistant personnel manager since 1985 in addition to playing second violin for the past 40 years. Ron's personnel job was considered a full-time one, and Sande's two-thirds, but players and SSO staff alike acknowledge that the personnel responsibilities have been more than full-time for both.

Their successors bring with them an important change in structure: For the first time, the personnel manager is not also a member of the orchestra. Keith Higgins will focus exclusively

on personnel matters, without performance responsibilities.

Higgins, who is a Seattle native, arrived from California in March to take over the personnel office. Ron is now "only a bass player," as he describes himself. Scott Wilson, who has taken Sande's place as assistant personnel manager, is on sabbatical from the horn section. Because he has been an orchestra member since 1971, he is now the de facto "institutional memory" for the office.

Although he is not expected to perform with the symphony, Keith is a percussionist who as a free-lancer played with orchestras throughout California and with the national touring companies of shows such as "Evita" and "Les Misérables." He was most recently the assistant orchestra personnel manager for the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

Major challenges

Keith and Scott face an unenviable task. As Ron sees it from his experience, they have several major challenges: They must become familiar, almost word-for-word, with the hundreds of provisions in the master agreement between the Seattle Symphony and Opera Players' Orga-



Newly retired personnel managers Sande Gillette and Ron Simon, in front of the tiny office they have shared in Benaroya Hall

nization and the symphony, and also the contract with Seattle Opera, because they will be responsible for ensuring the provisions are carried out. They will need to know the details about each of the nearly 200 individuals who comprise the "extras" roster for the symphony, since it falls to the personnel managers to know and

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Unless otherwise noted, all photos in this issue are the work of clarinetist Larey McDaniel.

PHOTOS AT TOP: ROBIN BARTHOLICK (LEFT AND RIGHT-CENTER), DAN LAMONT (LEFT-CENTER AND RIGHT)



Extra! Extra!

All about the orchestra's extras

If you think the musicians onstage at Benaroya Hall concerts are an often-changing group, you're absolutely right. In addition to its 90 full-time orchestra members, the Seattle Symphony relies on an array of additional professional musicians—called extras—to enable it to perform its wide array of programming.

Extras are required by every fulltime orchestra, to accommodate musicians' sick leave, vacations and other absences, and to fulfill the need for additional numbers of certain instruments for specific pieces. In Seattle, the demand for extras is increased because the orchestra plays for Seattle Opera as well as the symphony. During times when the players are divided into two groups because an opera is being staged, the availability of extras is particularly important to creating two orchestras that meet the programming dictates—especially if the opera is one requiring a larger-than-average orchestra.

Many extras required

Maintaining a roster of musicians available for "extra" slots is one of the jobs of the orchestra's personnel manager. Newly retired manager Ron Simon says he has needed an average of 150 different extras per season in recent years.

Seattle is a fortunate city, he thinks, in having a generous number of highly skilled free-lance musicians available. One reason for their presence is the plethora of classical music organizations. Many of the individuals on his "extras" roster also play for the Pacific

Northwest Ballet, the Bellevue Philharmonic, productions at venues like the Paramount, and other groups.

"Most of our extras are equally adept at multiple styles of music," Ron says, "and that's extremely important, given the wide range of our programming. Many of the people who play in the ballet orchestra were also in the Northwest Chamber Orchestra, so they know both classical and Baroque."

The schedules of those other music organizations can also complicate efforts to fill out the

symphony or opera orchestra with the extra musicians needed. Ron says he has always kept copies of the other groups' schedules at his fingertips, to make it easier to determine who among the individuals on his extras list would likely be available for specific concerts.

For the pops concerts, Ron adds, "the personnel manager has to know what the guest artist's style is. Sometimes I hired specialty trumpet players to support a particular soloist. A few saxophone players can play both classical and jazz, and I always knew who they are, because we sometimes needed them."

Finding the right extras

When a musician approaches the symphony about having his or her name added to the list of available extras, the individual's suitability is determined by playing for the principal of the relevant section. Ron estimates four to five new musicians have been added to the roster each season—and many players have been on the list for many years.

The extras are evaluated annually by fulltime symphony players. Section principals consult with their members for feedback on the individuals who have been hired to fill out the section, and the principals then meet with the conductor to build the hiring roster for the following year.

Not surprisingly, the largest number of extras on the roster are string players. They are also the most homogeneous group, according to Ron, in their familiarity with classical repertoire. "There are more differences among players of other instruments, as well as style considerations. Some horn players, for instance, have a style that differs from ours—which is a hiring consideration, because unified sound production is very important."

Woodwind and brass extras are the ones most likely to cause anxiety for personnel managers, because they are in shorter supply. Ron has observed that some of the symphony's wind and brass players have a tendency to come to work when they are ill because they know they are difficult to replace on short notice.

In that vein, the symphony gained an additional asset with the hiring of Keith Higgins as personnel manager this spring. When one of the section members called in sick and an extra could not be located in time for a morning rehearsal in April, Keith played percussion for the session. ●

"We've been very fortunate to have a large and stable pool of highly qualified people."

—Ron Simon, bass player and retired personnel manager



Stephen Bryant, second violin

“I talk about what I have passion for.”

—Stephen Bryant

Some members of the orchestra are as expert at talking about classical music as playing it, and the symphony’s pre-concert lecture series is one of the outlets for their knowledge and passion.

The informal presentations are held in Taper Auditorium at Benaroya Hall an hour before the beginning of most subscription concerts. Symphony Interim Education Director Nancy Gosen, who schedules the speakers, leaves it up to the individual to decide what to discuss in the half hour available.

Second violinist Stephen Bryant, who delivered his “debut” lecture in March, said it was easy for him to choose his focus. “I talked about what I have passion for. I love what I do; what could be better than to share why I love the second violin?” His presentation was titled “From a second violin perspective,” and he spoke about the “inner voices” that second violins provide for many pieces, playing passages that demonstrated his point.

Pre-concert lectures

Orchestra members share knowledge, perspective and passion

Helping audiences understand the music

Bassoonist Seth Krimsky may hold the musicians’ record for providing pre-concert lectures. In his 20 years with the orchestra, he has delivered 15 presentations. Seth has a specific approach to deciding what to talk about: “Each time, I choose the piece on the program that most audiences either don’t want to hear or don’t know at all. It’s usually a contemporary piece. Nobody really needs help getting through a Beethoven symphony, but Bartók can be scary. I try to help people understand it and learn to like it.”

He also chooses pieces that he has strong feelings about. “There’s usually a strong subtextual element: death, desire, lust.”

At press time, Seth was preparing the pre-performance lectures for Bartók’s “Bluebeard’s Castle,” to be performed May 31 and June 2 as part of the “Bridging the 48th Parallel” festival. “I’ll talk about how ‘Castle’ deals with the psychologically dark nature of man, and how it plays out in the piece. Often I also play excerpts from the composer’s other works, and pieces that influenced it—or were influenced by it. I try to put some context around what the audience is going to hear.”

Making use of “the incredible idea” in each piece

To prepare, Seth says, he usually reads or re-reads a biography of the composer, listens to the piece repeatedly, and studies the score. While the lecturers are not paid for their work, Seth finds another reward in his speaking commitments: “I compose music, and one of the benefits of doing the work to give one of these lectures is, when I compose something at a later date, I’m more likely to be able to steal surreptitiously if I’ve

studied the score. Each piece has at least one incredible idea, and it will inspire me to do something in response. ‘Bluebeard’ has quite a few great moments; Bartók was a very dense composer.”

For Steve, the payoff is simply this: “People get deeper inside the music when they listen to the inner voices. If someone gets new pleasure out of listening to a symphony because they hear new things based on what I’ve said, then I get some of that pleasure, too.” ●



Seth Krimsky, bassoon

“Nobody really needs help getting through a Beethoven symphony, but Bartók can be scary.”

—Seth Krimsky

Retiring orchestra members moving on: to

Three string players have a combined total of 120 years with the symphony



Violinist Wesley Fisk with his wife Rhetta and their newly adopted son Calvin

Wesley Fisk

Violinist Wesley Fisk is notorious among his fellow musicians for his candid quips and his insightful perspectives. It's not surprising, then, that Wesley sums up his present state of life this way: "I've been playing the violin for 55 years. I'm done."

The primary factor behind his decision to retire at the end of this season is a four-year-old boy with a charming smile. Wesley and his wife Rhetta adopted Calvin Viet Fisk from Vietnam in March. "This is going to be the best part of my whole life," Wesley says. "I've got both Calvin and Social Security!"

He intends to become a full-time dad, while his wife will return part-time to her work as a school librarian in Shoreline. "I'm going to give my whole self to this little boy, and help

him try to become a well-adjusted American citizen. I only hope he turns out as well as my two sons from my first marriage. They're great guys." Then, with a bit of mystery: "I've spent more time in jail than they have."

Competitive from the beginning

Wesley is a "Ballard Boy" who lives just a block from where he grew up. He attended Loyal Heights Elementary School, and he anticipates that Calvin will do the same.

Wesley didn't start violin lessons until he was 10 and, when he advanced to junior high school, he was dismayed to discover that some of his fellow music students had already had lessons and were well ahead of him. So he began practicing three hours a day—for the several years it took him to feel like he matched his peers' expertise.

His diligence and competitiveness paid off: Wesley was chosen to be concertmaster of the Seattle Youth Symphony for five years, under the tutelage of Vilem Sokol. He began music studies at the University of Washington, and also landed a part-time job with the Seattle Symphony. But both were interrupted by his draft board, and Wesley went to Vietnam as a medic—the beginning of a relationship with that country that was a factor in his and Rhetta's search for a child to adopt.

He completed his UW degree in violin performance after being discharged from the Army, playing again for the symphony while he was still a student.

Performance-ending medical injuries

Wesley has been absent from the Benaroya Hall stage for the past year. He has been on medical leave for 14 months because of significant problems with his right hand: a crucial element in a violinist's ability to play. He had two surgeries on a finger in the past year, "but it still sticks straight out, and it swells when I play tremolo," Wesley says.

Because of his finger and chronic back problems, he had earlier considered—but rejected—the possibility of retiring this summer. Then he and Rhetta were notified that a child was waiting for them in a Vietnamese orphanage, and that changed everything.

"Calvin had never been out of that orphanage, so everything he has been doing since he arrived in Seattle has been for the first time—even using crayons," Wesley notes. "He has incredible dexterity, and he's a great mimic. After only a couple of weeks with us, he was able to understand almost everything we said to him. The world seems to be his oyster, and I intend to be present to see him enjoy it."

These three retirees are part of an ever-smaller cadre of orchestra members: Seattle natives who have spent their entire careers with the symphony.

parenting, travel, volunteer projects



Sandra Lambert, bass

Sandra Lambert

Bass player Sandra Lambert intends to celebrate her retirement this summer by paddling 300 miles of Idaho's Salmon River with her husband and close friends Bruce and Mariel Bailey, who are fellow orchestra members. The way Sandy sees it, the raft trip is a logical application of some of the skills honed through her 33-year career with the symphony.

The two couples have rafted together before, and Sandy says their experiences have taught her that "being in a paddle boat is like being a section string player. When we went down the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon two years ago, our guide said 'just follow Mariel,' because she was the paddler in the bow of our boat. I told him I had no problem with that; after all these years in the bass section,

I can certainly maintain whatever rhythm someone starts."

What else is she looking forward to? "Retirement will be about being free to travel. I'm going to learn languages: I speak French, and I intend to learn Spanish, to make the travel even more enjoyable. And I'm going to read more books . . . *long* books."

Sandy expects that travel will also help her through a potentially difficult time this fall. "My husband suggested we go to France in mid-September so that the symphony season can start without me. That way I won't know or care so much what's going on in Benaroya Hall."

Her height was an early advantage

Sandy's ties to the Seattle Symphony stem from her very first music experiences: "I started music lessons in the fourth grade at John Muir Elementary School. My first teacher was Lois Timlin, who played in the symphony and also worked part-time as a string teacher at several elementary schools.

"I was the tallest kid in my class, so the school gave me its bass to use for the first year, until my parents bought me one.

"My first private teacher was symphony bassist Ron Simon. I was his first student. And then Ron sent me to Jim Harnett (a former principal bass player) when he was going to be away for the summer."

Sandy played in the all-city elementary orchestra, and joined the Seattle Youth Symphony as soon as she was old enough. She began college at Occidental College in Los Angeles, and

*"After the season is over,
I'm going to read more books.*

LONG books."

—Sandy Lambert

then transferred to the University of Southern California because it had a better music program.

"I went off to college in part to find out what I wanted to do, and I found out I really loved to play bass. I earned bachelor's and master's degrees in performance, and then I gave myself until age 30 to sign a contract with an orchestra. I figured if I couldn't do it by then, I'd go do something else."

Back in Seattle, Sandy substituted for the symphony for a year and then was hired as a part-time player for three years before playing full time. She also taught private lessons, with nine to 10 students at a time, until the symphony schedule grew too intense to allow time for teaching.

Hiking has been Sandy's major pastime for years: something she and her husband could fit around the symphony's often-intense schedule. They have hiked down into—and, perhaps more significantly, back out of—the Grand Canyon six times.

She intends to hike a great deal this summer, in part because she will be in training for the annual 60-mile, 3-Day Event to raise funds for breast cancer research and services. Breast cancer has affected several members of her family and, Sandy says, "It means so much to me to be able to do something about the disease."

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Dorothy Shapiro, viola

Dorothy Shapiro

Many professional musicians, after decades of endless practicing and performing, are happy to retire. Violist Dorothy Shapiro, however, is the only symphony player in her colleagues' memory who is so "ready" for retirement that she sold her instrument months in advance of her final concerts.

Dorothy has been the owner of a fabled viola made in Italy in 1699: one she was able to acquire because it had

been extensively restored after being run over (in its case) by a car. "The instrument sort of changed my life when I bought it in 1970," Dorothy says. "The viola was better than I was at that point, so I had to work at bringing my playing up to its level."

She acknowledges that it was traumatic to sell the instrument: "It's as though I've lost my voice." But she was nonetheless ready to pass it along to a new owner as part of closing out her symphony career and opening the next phase of adventure after nearly 40 years with the orchestra.

Ready to travel

Most of what Dorothy says she intends to do with her retirement years is an intensification of her favorite pursuits, with travel first on her list. Her wanderlust began with graduate school, when she went to Geneva for the summer to take a master class from Henryk Szeryng, and then spent several summers studying with Bruno Giuranna at Siena's L'Accademia Musicale Chigiana. She discovered during those student years that she has a facility for languages, coupled with a willingness to try to converse in a new language. "I like people, and I'm not shy. So I just make up words if I have to."

She describes herself as comfortable speaking German, thanks to a year spent performing and studying with Giuranna in Germany in the late 1970s, and "okay" in French, Spanish and Italian. She expects to increase

her Spanish fluency during a two-month visit to South America later this year.

While staying in Honduras in the mid-1990s to work on her Spanish, Dorothy added another love to her list of pastimes: scuba diving. She has since taken many diving vacations to exotic locales, and has also volunteered hundreds of hours at the Seattle Aquarium, maintaining her scuba skills while feeding fish and helping clean the giant underwater tank. In the future, she says, she hopes to dive as a volunteer in sea turtle sanctuaries and similar preserves around the world. "There's not much call for old violists; my diving skills may be in more demand."

Diligent about yoga

Although she describes herself as an "old violist," Dorothy also says she is stronger and in better physical condition than she was 15 years ago. She credits her yoga practice with realigning her body and keeping it flexible despite years of sitting in the asymmetric posture required of violists. "Playing the viola is an unnatural act," she says of its effect on the human body.

Dorothy notes that she will greatly miss her colleagues after this season ends. "They've been an absolute lifeline in this very difficult and stressful job."

She also acknowledges she will miss playing in the opera orchestra, and that she particularly enjoyed the seldom-produced *Julius Caesar* this winter: "It's an interesting and challenging score for the violas, because vibrato is used very sparingly. You use your bow to get all the inflection."

Dorothy says she "really loves the kinky operas: *Salome* and *Elektra*." *Rosenkavalier* is among her other favorites, as is *The Ring Cycle*. "I've played *The Ring* more times than I can remember, many of them as principal. I'd love to play it again." ●

George Fiore hangs up his baton

When long-time Seattle Symphony Chorale Director George Fiore retired this spring, he left Benaroya Hall on a proverbial high note. His final appearances with the chorale and orchestra were for Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* in early April.

Many of the musicians have worked with and admired Maestro Fiore for years, because he was Seattle Opera's chorus master before joining the symphony. The players wish him well and thank him for his many contributions to fine music in Seattle. ●

Orchestra personnel managers *continued from page 1*

assign those people appropriately. And they will have to master the details of the many processes required of the personnel office: tasks like scheduling, payroll, auditions, and coordinating the evaluation of first- and second-year orchestra members, who are still on probation.

“It takes a lot of late-night reading to absorb the master agreement,” Ron says. “Musicians’ contracts are extremely esoteric, in part because they spell out so many procedural matters. Even our attorneys sometimes have trouble understanding them all.”

Keith will work with the symphony’s human resources director on some aspects of personnel management. One difference in their roles is that Keith’s work involves only the musicians, whereas the h.r. director also has responsibility for certain matters related to everyone employed by the symphony, including staff.

When the orchestra is on tour, the symphony’s operations staff handles all the logistical work associated with the musicians. “My job as it relates to tours will be to ensure there are enough players in each section to perform the program,” Keith notes.

Tracking every detail

Having experienced a couple of months in his new role, Scott says there are “a great many little details that have to be attended to—all the time.” Among other tasks, he has learned the computer program Ron developed for tracking the vast amount of detail required for payroll management. The personnel managers must record data each day, noting which musicians are present and all factors that affect their pay—including a change in rate if a player is moved up to first stand for a rehearsal or a performance because a principal is ill.

When Seattle Opera is staging a production, the payroll-related workload is increased, because orchestra personnel managers track the necessary information for the opera and submit data separately to its staff.

Endless scheduling challenges

Scott also notes the myriad of scheduling processes handled by the personnel office, from assigning individuals to divided orchestra roles when the musicians are split between symphony and opera programs or part of the orchestra is on tour, to scheduling time off and tracking the sick leave used by each player.

Ensuring that the orchestra has qualified extras as needed is probably the area of responsibility for which Keith and Scott have the least amount of written guidance. Ron managed the “extras” function for many years, and acquired awesome familiarity with the individuals on the extras roster—right down to memorizing their telephone numbers so he could call them from his car on the way to the symphony hall in the mornings if necessary. And it sometimes was important to be able to do so, when he received an early alert that one or more orchestra members were sick and needed stand-ins.

And then there are auditions. The procedures for hiring new musicians cover many pages in the master agree-

More detail about the use and management of extra musicians can be found in the article on page 2.

ment, in part to ensure the process is as fair as possible. With the large number of individuals applying for symphony openings, auditions are enormously time-consuming for both personnel managers. “One year Ron and Sande had nine auditions in a single season. I don’t know how they managed it—especially with both of them also performing full-time,” Scott says.

Long-time relationships

Ron and Sande’s retirement represents a significant change for members of the orchestra, a majority of whom have experience with no other personnel managers. More than 50 of the current players met Ron and Sande when they supervised their auditions—and most of those with the longest tenure had their auditions

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Scott Wilson (left) and Keith Higgins, the orchestra’s new personnel managers, wrangle with one of the computer programs that helps them track nearly every facet of each musician’s work life.

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This newsletter reflects the input of dozens of members of the orchestra. The project is guided by:

Cecilia Poellein Buss, violin
Roberta Hansen Downey, cello

Virginia Hunt Luce, violin
Larey McDaniel, clarinet

Nancy Page Griffin, bass

Your suggestions welcomed

To suggest a story topic or make other comments, please write to us at our return address, send us an email (ssomusicians@gmail.com), or leave a message at 206-224-4487.

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Orchestra personnel managers

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managed by Ron's father, who was the personnel manager before him.

Ron and Sande speak enthusiastically of their years of experiences in the personnel office and applaud the symphony's decision to make Ron's successor a manager without performance obligations because of the degree to which the personnel responsibilities have grown over the years.

They say they will miss the camaraderie developed over the years as they have shared their many tasks. They have often joked about their different but complementary work styles. As Sande puts it, "We always said that I work vertically and tend to be future-focused, while Ron works horizontally: more in the present. It was a good mix. And I think we were successful because our first consideration was always what the musicians needed to be able to do their best job—whether the musicians were our own players, extras, or people auditioning for orchestra openings." ●

Remembering Larisa Miropolsky

Orchestra members were saddened by the death of Larisa Miropolsky in late March. Larisa, the wife of Assistant Principal Second Violinist Michael Miropolsky, was a freelance violinist who frequently played for the symphony, Seattle Opera and Pacific Northwest Ballet. She was often an orchestra member for Seattle Opera's summer productions, as well.

The Miropolskys immigrated from Russia in 1990; Michael has been a member of the orchestra since 1991.

"I always loved it when Larisa and I sat together as stand partners," fellow violinist Virginia Hunt Luce says. "She was a wonderful musician, and knew a great deal about Russian literature as well as Russian music. When we played *Boris Gudonov* for Seattle Opera, she talked about Pushkin, on whose poem the libretto is based, and his significance to Russians. It made playing the opera with her a special and memorable experience."

Larisa also taught violin and had many devoted students. She is survived by her husband and two teenaged children, Evelina and Alex, both of whom are talented musicians. ●