

25 Years of Music to Our Ears

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HEN DR. JACOB GOLDBERGER was ten years old, he received a used clarinet in a CARE package from a family member in the United States. It had traveled over 6,000 miles, crossing the entirety of the Atlantic Ocean to reach him at his home in Israel with his mother. It was the only instrument that was available, this slender woodwind with worn silver finger keys. Goldberger began taking clarinet lessons, learning to produce those shadowy timbre notes that make the instrument recognizable.

Goldberger eventually moved to the United States, and has been living in Fort Myers for 38 years, only recently retiring from his general surgery practice. He is one of the original members of the Gulf Coast Symphony, and has been playing the clarinet with the Symphony for twenty-four years. He still practices playing the clarinet at home, preparing for the upcoming 25th Anniversary Concert series. He's been performing concerts with the Symphony for a quarter of a century and still practice makes perfect.

"Every concert has been an absolute joy for me. Every season was a leap. Most of us were amazed at the level of improvements between rehearsal and performance. We usually walked off stage at the end of a performance in confused silence and awe after the audience gave us a standing ovation," Goldberger said in an interview.

The Gulf Coast Symphony's 25th Anniversary is a celebration of the Symphony's roots, of the two and a half decades worth of musicians who have made the Symphony's success possible. After interviewing the musicians, it's clear that the Symphony is more than a production — it's a community made of diverse members, held together by those invisible strings music creates between people.

Like Goldberger, Dr. Doni Landefeld, Board President of the Gulf Coast Symphony and member for 12 years, has been playing music since she was a child. Landefeld's musical origin story began when she was nine years old and her parents brought her to a high school orchestra concert. Sitting in the audience, she became enamored with the bass, which appeared

by Caylee Weintraub

to her as "a big funny violin thing." It's true: if the bass were a high school kid, it would be the one whose body keeps growing until it towers above the rest, the confidently oversized jock with deep voice that makes it seem older and wiser than everyone else.

A few months after the concert, Landefeld's parents surprised her with "a big, funny violin thing" of her own. The instrument towered above Landefeld's nine-year-old body.

"One of my first memories from when I started playing bass was that it was too large for me to carry, so my parents paid a middle-schooler to help me get it in and out of the car for me and walk it into school," Landefeld said.

Now Landefeld, stronger than she was at nine, bears the brunt of the Symphony's demanding non-musical work. She works beside Dr. Andrew Kurtz, founder and Maestro of the Gulf Coast Symphony, to serve on the non-profit board. When she's not there, she's rehearsing under Kurtz's baton with her bass.

"There are of course many musicians who make me laugh and the bass section, well, we sometimes misbehave, usually by talking when we're supposed to be listening to Andrew... kind of like naughty, talkative students in a classroom. Bass players are a bit gregarious by nature, so we always work to have a good time and enjoy the camaraderie," Landefeld said.

The Gulf Coast Symphony musicians come from all different areas of professional life; they are as diverse in origin as their instruments. Alfonso Giordano is the principal violist and owner of Maria's Restaurant & Pizzeria, a 'Best Italian Restaurant' in Cape Coral winner for years. Dr. Thomas Schiller is a pediatrician and principal French horn player. Both Giordano and Schiller are founding members of the Symphony, growing alongside it for over two decades.

"The Symphony gives me an opportunity to feel engulfed in a sea of harmonies, dissonances, musical shapes," Schiller said in an interview. "I love to express my musical 'voice' using a French horn, blending in with a large group."

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Maestro Andrew Kurtz

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The first time I saw Gulf Coast Symphony perform when I was 11 and went on a school field trip, I remember the feeling of intense connection to the music; it was inescapable and consuming but also comforting and wholesome. There are no words that can compensate for sound, and the Gulf Coast Symphony is something best experienced first-hand.

To bring the Symphony into the community, Maestro Andrew Kurtz has started a number of initiatives. Kurtz started the Orchestra Explorer series, where children can meet the musicians and try some of the instruments, fumbling with the clarinet keys or learning how to press the reed of an oboe between their lips.

"My favorite moment is seeing the delight in a child's eye when they make a first sound on my miniature French Horn," Schiller said of the Orchestra Explorer series, witnessing the union between his pediatric professional life and his musical one.

The Symphony has partnered with Lee County Library to add music to storytime events in their Symphony Storytime series and with The Heights Center to bring music education to underserved children.

In honor of their 25th Anniversary, the Symphony has played with award-winning country music star of Sugarland Kristian Bush, and will play alongside the Grammy-winning Shelley Berg Trio. The Symphony will also be playing 25 free events in January and February.

"I take deep pride in creating a really diverse calendar of concerts and different experiences from intimate to big, grand operas," Kurtz said.

Symphony Maestro Andrew Kurtz is the visionary behind each concert: a visionary with high standards.

"I spent years studying with a professional clarinetist so I could meet Andrew's expecta-

tions and keep up with the level of performances," Goldberger said.

Schiller's first experience playing a concert under Kurtz's baton, the first ever performance Gulf Coast Symphony put on for the public in 1994, is still a clear recollection. "Andrew needed a horn to play in the first performance of the Gulf Coast Symphony. He found me by word of mouth. Unfortunately, I hadn't touched my horn for 9 months," Schiller said. "I reluctantly said 'yes,' not knowing I'd be asked to play a Ravel horn solo on that same day of the concert.

A Ravel horn solo is notoriously difficult, requiring a widespread range of low and high notes. "Needless to say, I didn't play well on my debut performance," Schiller said. "But, Andrew appreciated my effort. Andrew knew how to make the music come alive in me with his deep passion for music and excellent conducting skills."

Kurtz fell in love with music through his grandmother, a pianist. Music has been part of his family for generations, and watching Kurtz conduct the Symphony makes it clear how naturally music comes to him.

Standing in front dressed in a black suit with long coat tails, his baton suspended in the air, Kurtz and the Gulf Coast Symphony are something to behold. There is a complete silence before the Symphony begins to play, the sound of shuffling in the audience before Kurtz waves his hand and, like parting the Red Sea in reverse, brings the woodwinds, strings, brass, and percussion together into one wave of

music. There's something transformative about watching a Symphony perform, to see dozens of people converge into a single sound.

When Kurtz first started the orchestra, he had no idea how much it would grow. He remembers passing out flyers and asking for musicians through word of mouth when the Symphony was still unstrung. But despite how far

the Symphony has come, Kurtz is forward-looking. "My job and my strength is always envisioning what the greater future can be," he said. He plans every concert over a year in advance, always living with one foot in the present and one in the future.

Kurtz says he is most proud of the Symphony's impact on the people who've been part of it. The personal relationships the Symphony creates between its members is clear, and it is this that seems most worth celebrating for the 25th Anniversary.

"Throughout the years I've had three long term members of my section pass away and there have been many that have come and gone through the years," Giordano, principal violist, said. "I still miss Florence — she was my stand partner for many years, a retired professional violist from Pittsburgh. I still see her markings in the music we played and she always had some funny comments about Andrew, soloists, the board, everything and everyone!"

This is where Kurtz's Symphony transcends itself: in the camaraderie between bass players and the funny notes a retired violist leaves in the sheet music for her stand partner, in the way invisible music transmutes into tangible human connection.

"Music is my passion," Jacob Goldberger, the clarinetist-surgeon from Israel, said. "The orchestra became my refuge." •

Gulf Coast Symphony concerts are performed at the Barbara B. Mann Performing Arts Hall in Fort Myers. For information, call 277-1700.