

LETTERS TO OUR FRIENDS



Introducing a new feature! In Letters to Our Friends, long-time former principal clarinet Jimmy Gilmore answers your questions and discusses your observations about the North Carolina Symphony. Readers of *Opus Magazine* have enjoyed Jimmy's feature articles for years. In this issue, he responds to a patron's observations about our education concerts during a tour of western North Carolina in spring 2010.

On the orchestra's tour of western North Carolina you observed that the kids were the most interested in seeing and hearing the instruments. I have had the same experience throughout my career. And why not? A symphony orchestra is a feast for the eye as well as the ear, and all those different instruments assembled on one stage are bound to be a source of wonder and amazement for a child.

Sometimes we try to explain things too much and give short shrift to those things that we experience through the senses. Actually seeing and hearing an instrument played will always trump an explanation of what it looks and sounds like. The French horn received a big reaction when the kids heard it played, but their imaginations really caught fire when they were told that the horn would be twenty-seven feet long if you uncoiled it! This combination of seeing, hearing and being told an amazing fact is a perfect balance to form a lasting memory for the child. Regardless, the principle seems to be: the larger the instrument, the greater the reaction. You noted that the audience was "thrilled by the tuba." This is universal, just as visitors to the zoo are more impressed with the elephant than the marmot.

Speaking of zoos, the children who attended the Instrument Zoo were given the unique opportunity to touch the instruments and try to produce a sound on them. Encountering the

instruments on this level is a great way to follow up a concert. How many times have we heard a child say he or she liked the flute the best, or the trumpet, or the violin? Actually trying a favorite instrument after hearing it played by a professional is a great help because the child already has a concept of what it should sound like and how it is played.

You were also interested in the audience's reaction to the music itself. The kids were uninhibited in their excitement as they bounced in their seats and swayed to the music, their body language showing an enthusiasm rare in an adult audience. Stravinsky once quipped that, "Music expresses nothing but itself." Doubtless this was said in reaction to the excesses of German Romanticism and the concept of programmatic music, but one wonders what Stravinsky would have thought had he been present for the education concerts you attended. What, except the music, could cause the audience to sway and pretend to click castanets in the "Spanish Dance," and hop to the music of *The Lone Ranger*? Who knows what accompanying extra-musical thoughts may have entered their minds? The kids' physical reaction was what naturally happens when we feel the music. It would take a very serious effort to stifle that natural urge.

The fascination for musical instruments and how they work is illustrative of another interesting point. All the kids you witnessed

who were playing some sort of "air instrument" are children of the high-tech, electronic age. Our education concerts bear witness to the fact that 17th-, 18th- and 19th-century technology, as embodied in the instruments of the orchestra, still has the power to sway. The violin has not changed form for centuries and represents a technology that some would say reached its zenith with Stradivari and Guarneri centuries ago. Ironically those iconic makers are the very ones that modern luthiers spend a lifetime trying to emulate. All the instruments in the modern orchestra were a part of the ensemble by the early years of the 19th century. Yes, improvements have been made to key systems on the woodwinds and the mechanics of the brasses have improved, but the instruments have retained their basic forms for at least two centuries.

When the students attend an education concert, they are given the opportunity to experience the visceral excitement of live performance. The material on the concert represents some of the finest music our culture has produced. That the North Carolina Symphony has availed four generations of citizens this opportunity is a remarkable legacy, unique among symphony orchestras.

— Jimmy Gilmore

*Have an idea or question you'd love for Jimmy to tackle?
Please write to him at jmellinger@ncsymphony.org.*

