

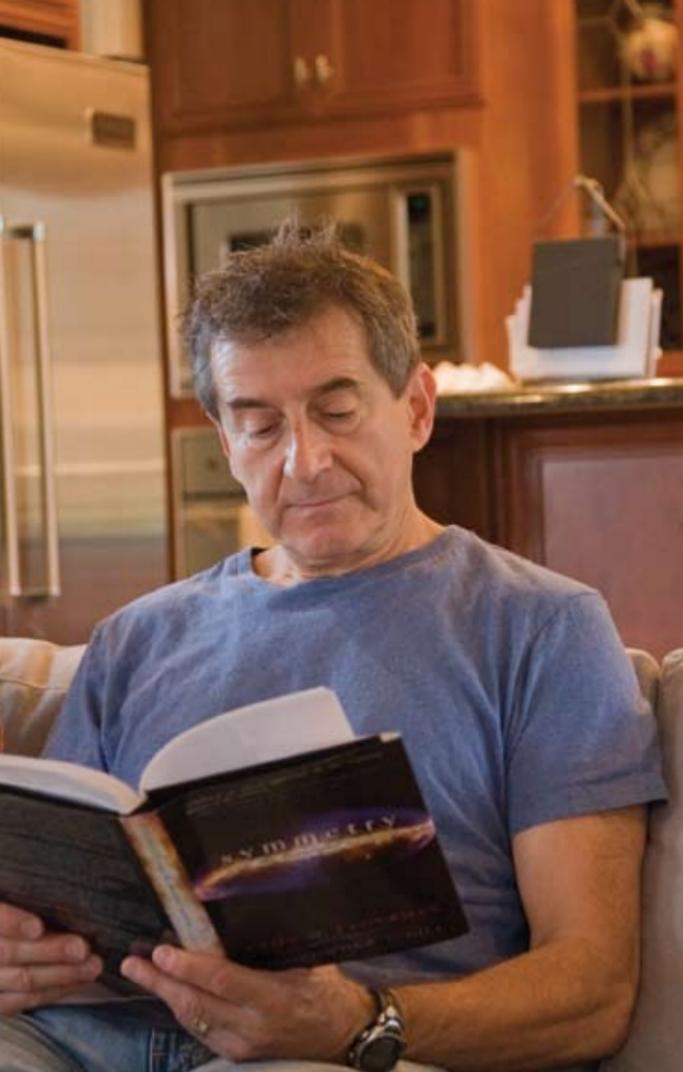
VIC BENEDICT

the man with two brains

A FEW ROWS BACK IN THE NORTH CAROLINA SYMPHONY, JUST BEHIND THE STRINGS, YOU WILL FIND THE WOODWINDS. DEPENDING ON WHERE YOU ARE SEATED, THE FLUTES, OBOES AND CLARINETS MAY BE HARD TO SEE, BUT YOU MIGHT NOTICE TWO BASSOONS, SLIM AND SLIGHTLY BELL-SHAPED AT THE TOP, POKING LIKE DARK SCEPTERS ABOVE THE HEADS OF THE CELLISTS. YOU PROBABLY FEEL CONFIDENT THAT NEITHER OF THOSE BASSOONS IS BEING PLAYED BY A HIGHLY-TRAINED SCIENTIST. BUT YOU WOULD BE WRONG.

by Jennie Hellingren





VIC BENEDICT IS VERY MUCH A DOCTOR OF PHYSICS WHO ENJOYS A GOOD BOOK ON STRING THEORY.

Vic Benedict, that quiet, tuxedoed assistant Principal Bassoonist you occasionally glimpse through the forest of instruments, is very much a doctor of physics who enjoys chilling out with a good book on string theory. He is also a chef and sources close to his kitchen say he is a darn good one. He loves word puzzles. He has a vast repertory of Italian jokes and is reported to be a big fan of Rodney (I get no respect) Dangerfield. He is deadly on the racquetball court, thrashing partners half his age. And with no formal conservatory training he plays bassoon in a professional, full-time symphony orchestra.

A modern-day Renaissance man, Vic can trace his ancestry to Renaissance ground zero – all four of his grandparents were born in Italy. Vic himself was born in Conshohocken, PA, a small town on the Schuylkill River about 10 miles from Philadelphia. Historically an industrial and manufacturing center, Conshohocken was a city of factories and Vic's father worked in two of them: one made military uniforms and the other manufactured knit-

ting machines. His mother, an amateur violinist, stayed at home.

After hours, even during the week, Vic's father played the lead trumpet in his own Joe Benedict Orchestra, sometimes returning home at 1 or 2am and still getting up in the morning for a full day of work. The Joe Benedict Orchestra was a Big Band, playing Glenn Miller/Harry James-style repertoire. Later, the band downsized to smaller ensembles – just Joe, a keyboard and some drums. Eventually, when Joe became a floor manager in his factory, he gave up the band altogether. But for Vic, something important about music was taking root.

Vic's first instrument was the clarinet. "I wanted to be in the band in fifth grade and so I asked my father what instrument I should play," says Vic. "He thought about it for a while and said clarinet. Maybe he was thinking about Benny Goodman." The band teacher, an oboe player, helped Vic with his embouchure.

In high school, Vic switched to the bassoon. The school had just acquired one

and the instructor asked him if he wanted to play it. "I really liked it," Vic remembers. "The sound drew me in. It was also intriguing to me because the band had lots of clarinet players but I would be the only bassoon player. And it was something new." He was on his own, however, as far as technique. "All I got was a fingering chart," Vic laughs.

Teaching himself to play the bassoon could not have been easy. "It's more complicated than it looks," says Vic, as he demonstrates an instrument that in no way appears to be simple. He lifts the lid of the B-flat key. "There are three holes under here, not just one. They all go to a different place. How they figured this out, I cannot imagine. All I know is this: you could write an equation for a flute, but not for a bassoon."

Even without formal instruction, Vic's zeal for the instrument took him a long way. "I was not one of those kids that had to be forced to practice," he says. "I loved etudes and scales – even more than songs or whole works. I remember my parents yelling up to my room (in jest) – will you please stop that cow noise and come down here for dinner?"

Soon, fate intervened to bump things up a notch in Vic's music education. He decided to play in the Norristown Orchestra. "I got to know a horn player in that orchestra. His name was Robert E. Lee, which, of course, is why I remember it."

Lee was an electrical engineering student at Drexel Institute of Technology in downtown Philadelphia. He also played in the Philadelphia Youth Orchestra and convinced Vic to play there too. "I auditioned and was accepted," Vic says. "The PYO was orders of magnitude superior to the little Norristown Orchestra. I was absolutely floored by the quality of playing and I decided maybe I should take lessons."

PYO conductor Joseph Primavera set up an audition for Vic with John Shamlan, assistant Principal Bassoon of the Philadelphia Orchestra. "My family didn't have a lot of money," Vic says. "Lessons were too expensive at \$7 an hour." Vic asked instead about taking a half-hour lesson every two weeks.

Shamlan considered this, but believed that Vic really needed weekly lessons. "We agreed to a half-hour lesson once a week for \$3.50," Vic recalls. "Only none of the lessons were thirty minutes. They were at least 45 minutes and sometimes longer.

He would also pretend to 'find' reeds and he'd toss them to me saying 'here, these are probably no good, but maybe you can do something with them.' And of course, they were splendid reeds."

Vic's two years of lessons with this fairy godfather of a bassoonist constitutes his only proper music training. Clearly, Shamlan saw in Vic a talent and a passion that he wanted to cultivate. "John was a wonderful guy," Vic says. "He's still living – he's about 86 years old and repairs bassoons."

Vic continued with music while attending college at Drexel Institute. "Robert E. Lee encouraged me to attend Drexel. They had a work-study program. I wouldn't have been able to go to college otherwise." Vic had different kinds of jobs during the work segments. "One was at a wire mill," he says. "They made all kinds of electrical cable. My job was to test their safety by applying high voltage."

He also had a job at a big government lab in Fort Monmouth, NJ working on high-density hydrogen plasmas. If you ask him what they are for, he'll respond with a sly grin, "If I tell you, I'll have to kill you." In fact, the plasmas are used in making switches for giant pulse lasers used in weapons. Maybe it is better not to ask.

Despite a grueling schedule of wire-testing, secret government plasmas and school, he took up alto sax. "I didn't play bassoon because I didn't have one," Vic says. But at least he was still playing. And so it happened that a decision to play in a little amateur orchestra in Norristown, PA, led Vic, through Robert E. Lee to Drexel and Joseph Primavera, through Primavera to John Shamlan and thus to the realization of his two great passions: science and music.

Yet Vic didn't take up the bassoon again until graduate school at the University of Georgia. While focusing on the far from carefree task of getting a doctorate in physics, Vic decided the bassoon would be fun again, especially when he learned the University would loan him one if he agreed to be in the orchestra. And, still in graduate school, he also played full time with the Savannah Symphony.

His physics advisor warned Vic that all this bassoonery would slow him down in the pursuit of his degree. Of course, he was right. Vic would play the six-month Savannah season, then return to writing his dissertation on "Some Magnetother-

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mal Properties of Anti-Ferromagnetic Manganese Chloride Tetrahydrate". Then back to Savannah for six more months in the orchestra and so on. When Vic earned his doctorate at age thirty, it was only by chance that he became a musician instead of a physicist.

Mozart or high density hydrogen plasmas? Beethoven or anti-ferromagnetic manganese chloride tetrahydrate? "I actually would have been happy doing either thing," Vic says. "My first wife, Judy

Berman, and I were offered jobs with the North Carolina Symphony at about the same time I finished my degree. If I hadn't gotten that job, I probably would be doing physics somewhere."

With two such divergent paths in front of him, did he ever question if he had done the right thing? "Well," he muses, "there were some moments in the 1970s when the orchestra was struggling and I did kind of wonder if I'd made the right choice. But I stuck with it."

It was 1973 when the newly minted Dr. Vic Benedict took his years of scientific training and esoteric knowledge to the North Carolina Symphony bassoon section. The music director was John Gosling. "It was a very different orchestra back then," Vic remembers. "We had a 33-week season with as many as 55 overnights. Now it's a 41-week season with maybe fifteen overnights. But to me, the biggest change is in the public perception of the orchestra.

In the old days, if you told someone you played in the North Carolina Symphony, the next question would be 'so what do you do for a living?' "Now people know and understand that the Symphony is a real organization that contributes to the state in many ways, including economically. Just recently I was in the locker room at the Y and overheard one guy telling another that one of the reasons he and his family chose to move to Raleigh was the impressive number of cultural opportunities and he gave the North Carolina Symphony as an example. And of course, we've improved enormously over the years."

Vic and Judy divorced in 1980 and Judy moved on to the Cleveland Orchestra. The marriage produced, interestingly, one physicist and one musician. Son Lorin, 37, lives in San Francisco and works at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory as a theoretical physicist. "Lorin played the violin," says Vic. "We told him that was his job until he was twelve. Our argument was this: what if he quit at eight and then when he was sixteen he got mad at us for not making him stick with it? So we said twelve. And that's when he quit."

There is a bit of the dual brain in Lorin, though, too. When he is not thinking about theoretical physics, he is a scat singer with San Francisco area jazz bands. "He doesn't use the scat language you usually hear. Lorin and his sister had their own language when they were kids and Lorin has adapted it to scat," says Vic. In spite of his work on top secret projects at Livermore, Lorin believes that his contribution will be more in the world of music. His scat singing is that unique. "Right now," says Vic, "he has nine gigs lined up." This, please understand, is in addition to a couple of papers about to be published in major physics journals.

Vic's daughter Cheryl, 31, is more single-minded in her interests. A violinist,

she stuck with her instrument well past the magic age of twelve, earning a Bachelor's Degree in Music from Eastman and then a Master's from the Cleveland Institute of Music. For a time, she and Vic were the only father-daughter pair in the North Carolina Symphony. In 2002, Cheryl broke up the team, joining the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra where she plays second violin.

In 1982, Vic married North Carolina Symphony French horn player Eileen Gress, whom Vic had known for years. "I was what you call 'a good horse husband,'" Vic smiles. "Eileen had always wanted a horse and when she saw the opportunity to have one, she did."

With 22 acres in Apex, Vic and Eileen had plenty of room for husky mix Jackie, cat Beau, three goats and six or seven horses that Eileen boarded for other owners. They built the barn themselves. "It was beautiful," says Vic. "Solid oak, six stalls, a tack room, everything you would need. We did have some help with the big posts and there was one day that some of the orchestra musicians came out to help."

Vic thought that with the help of this Amish-style barn-raising, they would be finished in three days. "It took quite a bit longer than that," Vic says ruefully. "We would get home from rehearsal at 4pm, change into work clothes and go out there and spend hours banging on boards. Three days turned out to be three years. But it looked great when it was finished!"

It must have seemed like a nicely settled life, Vic and Eileen playing together in the North Carolina Symphony, enjoying the menagerie of animals and the private coziness of a sprawling property. But underneath the joy, Eileen was engaged in an 18-year struggle with cancer. "It started in the breast," says Vic. "She recovered and was fine for about five years. But then it returned in her thyroid."

Over the years, Eileen beat back other tumors in the brain, bone, and even a particularly tricky one behind the eye. "She had a lot of inner strength," Vic says, "and a really good network of friends and people who cared about her. She wasn't sick that whole time; she had many good years in between. We had great care at Rex Cancer Center. The doctors there always said she was their star patient."

When she learned that the cancer

had spread to her liver, it was Vic who fell apart, not Eileen. "She just kind of shrugged and said, well it was bound to happen," Vic remembers. The orchestra management was very understanding. "I would have been happy to take an unpaid leave but they said no, be with Eileen as much as you need to be and don't worry about it," says Vic. "This was such a relief to me, to be able to be with her."

Most difficult for Vic was seeing Eileen play what he knew would probably be her last concert. "I don't think she knew it herself at the time. But when she came back for the next rehearsal, it just wasn't working. And then she knew. That was really hard."

Eileen died in December 2004. At the first concert weekend after that, January 7 and 8, 2005, North Carolina Symphony Conductor Laureate Gerhardt Zimmermann and the orchestra performed a moving rendition of "Nimrod" from Elgar's *Enigma Variations* and a Giovanni Gabrieli canzona for brass alone, in tribute. Vic was backstage. "I was happy that Gerhardt was conducting those concerts," he says quietly, "because he had known Eileen for so many years."

But life must go on. While Vic says he was okay living on his own, he decided to try speed dating. Yes, speed dating. And why not? We can see how this would appeal to the scientist in Vic. Speed dating is quick and efficient. You gather data in a controlled setting that you can study later in order to form a hypothesis – do I wish to see X person again, based on the initial experiment? Should there be additional studies? You fill out a form indicating your preferences and the other speed daters do the same. If there's a match, you have results indicating that a further experiment should be attempted.

Did it work? Let's turn to Mirinda Kossoff, Vic's current wife and the subject of his speed dating experiment. A tall striking woman with beautiful blue eyes and close-cropped snowy hair, Mirinda could be a film star. "I did it as a lark," she says. "A friend of mine had tried it and I thought, well, what the heck. It will be a success if there aren't too many comb-overs!"

For those who are still in the dark about this increasingly popular 21st century phenomenon, here's how it works: women participants sit at individual tables, while



VIC AND MIRINDA BENEDICT PLAY IN A HALL OF MIRRORS IN SAN GIMIGNANO, ITALY.

the men move along the continuum, spending five minutes at each table. Each person, wearing a first-name only nametag, has a piece of paper for note taking. After the event is over, speed daters go online and indicate by name and number which individuals they would like to see again. If there is a match, contact information is provided and the daters take it from there.

"When Vic came to my table he just seemed so kind and so sweet," says Mirinda. "We talked about the fact that, without knowing it, we had been on stage together many times because I used to sing with the Durham Choral Society. We remarked on how strange a coincidence that was. He seemed very warm and like a really nice guy."

Vic was interested too. "For our first real date, he offered to make dinner for me at his place and take me to a North Carolina Symphony concert afterwards," says Mirinda. "Ordinarily, I would never go to a man's house right away, but he seemed entirely trustworthy, so I accepted.

"He made a wonderful dinner. The concert was Burt Bacharach. Vic played the first half and joined me after intermission. I think I made a crack about some of the music and then thought, 'I shouldn't have said that, maybe I'm insulting him.' But he came back with a crack of his own, so I thought, 'oh good, he has a sense of humor!'"

It wasn't all fireworks and tango by candlelight at the beginning. "It was a while before he called me again," Mirinda says. "But you know, he just started cooking for me. For six months, we never even held hands. It was just me going to his house, hanging out, the two of us taking Jackie for walks and Vic making me these amazing dinners."

"Then one night," she says, "his daughter Cheryl was there. I adore her – she is such a wonderful young woman. I watched the way they interacted and I was impressed at what a great father-daughter relationship they had. And that's when I thought, and apparently he did too, that maybe it

would be okay to see what it would be like to have a little good night kiss."

That did it. Speed dating success story. Mirinda and Vic were married November 19, 2006. "He complements me," Mirinda says. "He's very laid back and stable and sane while I tend to have the artistic temperament, going in all directions. He centers me." Mirinda, an artist who paints, sculpts and makes jewelry admits to getting involved in various projects and ignoring dinner if Vic is away. "When he's here, he makes these wonderful meals and he's happy to do it to support my being able to be in the studio."

A November wedding meant that instead of a honeymoon, Vic was on the road for the Symphony's famously intense Holiday Pops statewide concert tour. Their thought, once it was clear that they wanted to marry, was "why wait?" So Vic sold his farm, Mirinda sold her condominium and they bought a house together.

VIC'S STUFFED BEEF ROLLS NEOPOLITAN (*Braciolo*)

*3/4 lb. chopped beef
1 tbsp grated Parmesan cheese
2 tbsp raisins
1 clove garlic, minced
1 tbsp chopped parsley
Salt and pepper to taste
1 egg, slightly beaten
4 4"x6" slices of top or bottom round
4 thin slices prosciutto*

*1/4 cup olive oil
1 small onion, chopped
1 clove garlic, crushed
1/4 cup dry white wine
1 16 oz. can tomatoes, cut up
Salt and pepper to taste*

Combine first six ingredients into a loaf, mixing thoroughly and adding enough beaten egg to hold together.

Pound beef slices thin, place a slice of prosciutto on each slice of beef and spread a portion of the beef mixture on each slice.

Roll each slice and secure with tooth-picks. Brown beef rolls in hot olive oil with onions and crushed garlic; remove garlic when it begins to color.

Add wine a little at a time and allow it to evaporate; add tomatoes and juices, season with salt and pepper.

Lower heat, cover and simmer gently for about two hours or until beef rolls are tender.

Vic usually puts in a little tomato paste and water to add to the sauce.

Serve over your favorite pasta.

Buon Appetito!



CHEF VIC IN THE KITCHEN

Spacious and inviting, the house is filled with artwork – much of it Mirinda's. There is even a piece by Vic, a vivid, abstract painting he created in graduate school, representing the Greek letter lambda. "In physics," explains Vic, "near the liquid helium temperatures I was working with, there is a transition called the lambda transition which separates the classical from the quantum mechanical world. That's the meaning of the painting."

The house has room for a Pilates studio, an office-studio for Vic, an art studio for Mirinda, a yard for Jackie (Beau lives with Eileen's mother now) and an excellent kitchen for Chef Benedict to turn out all those fabulously winning meals.

The honeymoon, delayed until the end of the 2006-07 concert season, took Vic to Italy for the first time in his life. "Rome was exciting," Vic says. "We went to the top of the dome of St. Peter's and looked out over the whole city." But the favorite part of the trip for Vic was Tuscany. "For the most part, we were off the beaten path. We were interested in places that were not full of tourists, and we wanted totally local cuisine that would give us the real flavor of the area."

On their first night in Italy, Vic and Mirinda checked into their hotel and walked to a nearby restaurant. "We sat down and toasted each other," says Mirinda, "and he had tears in his eyes." Vic also remembers this moment. "I didn't know at first what it was all about," he says. "And then I realized – I'm in my homeland. And there were all these people that looked like my uncles – all these short, dark men! It was wonderful."

Co.

And what about now? Life has brought Vic more than one surprise – a life as a professional musician, a divorce, happiness in a new marriage, widowerhood and then happiness again. "You know," he says, "I just don't worry that much about the future. I'm one of those guys – if I won the lottery tonight, I wouldn't change anything. I would still play the bassoon and do the things I am doing right now that make me happy. That's who I am. Life is good."

