



MUSICIAN,

with Luggage

By Jeannie Mellinger



A side-by-side rehearsal in Asheville's Thomas Wolfe Auditorium.

On the Road, Asheville

It's a dark, cold and rainy morning in early spring. Two buses filled with North Carolina Symphony musicians drive through the gray streets, long wiper arms moving fast, headlights blinking through the downpour. The destination is Lipinsky Auditorium on the UNC-Asheville campus, where some early arrivals are peeling off their wet jackets and talking quietly.

Musicians filter in, and soon everyone is tuning up or changing reeds or checking bows or practicing runs and passages. The audience is small, but enthusiastic. Nearby middle and high schools cancelled their attendance at the last minute, citing bus-ing problems. But there are some students from a music history class at the university, as well as a group of band and orchestra students from Asheville High School. They seem excited to be here.

The program is colorful and lively – Respighi's Tarantella, Falla's Spanish Dance, Rossini's *William Tell* Overture, Brahms's Hungarian Dance No. 7 and more. Associate Conductor Sarah Hicks engages the students from the podium as the musicians play through the program. She talks about the life of a musician – the

Eric Dyke. "It doesn't matter if we've played the piece fifty times before in the last months. The audience is maybe hearing it for the first time, and we always keep that in mind."

Dear Mr. Llewellyn: How many years have you been conducting? Who writes your music? Do you conduct the same people every time? I could go on forever, but I don't want you to have to read a thousand pages.

– Erin, grade 5

And so it has been since the earliest days. For nearly eighty years, the North Carolina Symphony has traveled across the state, from the mountains to the coast, presenting concerts in a tradition that is unmatched and unrivaled by any other orchestra in the country. "Approximately forty-five concerts are given free to school children in Raleigh and throughout the state each year," says Director of Education Jessica Nalbone. "Of those forty-five, about thir-

Asheville, Late Afternoon

The North Carolina Symphony is at Thomas Wolfe Auditorium in downtown Asheville for a side-by-side rehearsal with the Asheville-Buncombe Youth Symphony. The musicians are scattered among the high school players – Symphony violins with student violins, Symphony clarinets with student clarinets and so on.

Rehearsal begins with Berlioz's Hungarian March from *La Damnation de Faust*, Op. 24. Sarah Hicks points out mistakes but does not stint on praise. "Don't put accents where they are not." And then, after a few false starts, "Good. That sounded much better." She is patient, but also quite clear about what she wants to hear. "Stop, please. Do the grace notes come before or on the beat?" Silence. And then, "Talk to me. Musically." With every instruction, the ensemble incrementally improves.

"The students had a really positive experience of rehearsing with a professional orchestra and conductor," says Youth Symphony Director Ron Clearfield. "It was nice too, that each of the students had a fine professional to sit with as a mentor. The students I talked with went away with enthusiasm and gratitude."



From left: Musicians confer before the concert, Cherokee students anticipate their North Carolina Symphony performance and students return to the bus after the Shelby concert.

daily hours of practice, teaching, rehearsal, chamber music, performance. The musicians demonstrate their instruments, section by section. The audience smiles for the oboe's snake charmer passage and rocks out with the percussion. The orchestra is performing this concert for the thirty-first time this school year, and before they return to Raleigh at the end of this trip they will have played it thirty-five times, with seven more to go before the end of the season.

How do they keep their playing energetic, their performance sharp? "To perform is an honor and a pleasure," says double bassist

ty of them are in rural areas, often serving schools with some of the highest poverty rates in North Carolina."

Retired principal clarinetist Jimmy Gilmore figures that in his forty-one years with the orchestra he played over 3,000 education concerts and traveled approximately 600,000 miles. "Great music sets a very high standard," he explains. "All of us must rise to the level of the subject. Beethoven is great whether we're playing in Meymandi Concert Hall or in a tobacco barn. We always try to play our best because each of us knows we owe it to Beethoven, the audience and ourselves."

On the Road, Cherokee

Another day on the bus. It's no longer raining, but it is still overcast and chilly. The orchestra is heading west to Cherokee. Along the way, we pass Lost Cove Campground, Pan Fer Gold, Wigwam Gift Shop, Live Bears and the enormous Harrah's Cherokee Casino Hotel, one source of wealth that makes possible the gorgeous Cherokee Central Schools and Cultural Arts Center campus.

The school complex opened in 2010 and serves about 1,200 K-12 students. The 1,040-seat performance hall, with its state-



Assistant Concertmaster Rebekah Binford offers advice to a young Asheville violinist.



A student tries the violin at an Instrument Zoo.



Shelby students ready for the music.

It would be so cool if I can be in a symphony too. I just have to get lessons and lots of practice.

— Andrew, grade 4

of-the-art lighting and electronics, video projection, orchestra shell and forty-two-foot fly space is clearly one of the state's most impressively outfitted school concert venues.

The performance goes well, but the most exciting part of the orchestra's visit seems to be the post-concert Instrument Zoo. Dozens of children, twitching with excitement, wait in a long line to try out the flute, violin, clarinet, viola, trumpet, trombone and French horn. They nearly faint with pleasure when they produce an authentically musical sound. Best moment? A young boy, maybe nine or ten, notices violinists Maria Evola and Jeremy Preston waiting nearby. He runs over to get autographs. They comply. As he turns away to get back in line, his smile nearly wraps around his head. He shows his friends. They gasp. It's as if they were just handed the keys to a Camaro and told to go get pizza.

"I'm constantly amazed by how easy it is to get kids hooked on classical music," says Nalbene. "Some students will show up thinking that a concert of all classical rep-

ertoire is boring and dated, and time after time, we change their minds. It's all about the live concert! Even those who have heard the music beforehand and thought it didn't quite speak to them will then see the orchestra perform live, and that is what clinches the deal."

On the Road, Shelby

Finally, a beautiful spring day, sunny and cool. Unlike the posh facilities at Cherokee, Shelby High School Auditorium is more of a "gymnasium." Students sit in bleachers on either side of the room and in chairs placed in front of the orchestra on the gym floor.

These students, fourth and fifth graders, many of them part of a big orchestra program in this school district, are attentive and polite. They respond to Sarah when she speaks to them and focus intently on the music. Their reactions to the instrument demonstrations are typical – there is an especially big response for the tuba and bassoons. Associate Principal Bassist Bob

There I was, walking to the Symphony. I felt so happy. When the musicians played a song my friend Philip and me hit our knees and copied the beat. When the conductor introduced the tuba, it shined and everybody said ooooooh! When the symphony was over, I didn't want to leave. I wanted to listen to more music. I hope I go there again.

— Derek, grade 4

Anderson, whose instrument is sporting a green scarf in honor of St. Patrick's Day, gets a laugh when he demonstrates those deepest angry bear notes.

One student seems unmoved by the performance, until the *William Tell* Overture.

First, her eyebrows slowly rise. Then she turns to the student next to her and mouths the word, "Wow." Soon she is galloping in her seat. She starts watching Bob, who is right in front of her, and when he has the opportunity, he makes a silly face at her. She grins back and nods. After the concert, she hangs back to talk to a couple of the musicians, face animated. We've seen this before. She's hooked.

"Our orchestra changes the lives and outlooks of thousands of kids throughout North Carolina," says Nalbene. She knows this, knows it's quantifiable. She hears it from kids and teachers directly, reads it in the thousands of letters they send to the Symphony each season. Every day, musicians and staff meet long-grown adults who say that seeing the North Carolina Symphony perform at their tiny school in the fourth or fifth grade left an indelible mark on their lives and introduced them to an art form that they have cherished ever since. ●

SINCE ITS BEGINNINGS ALMOST EIGHTY YEARS AGO, the North Carolina Symphony has persisted in its service and commitment to the state, believing that sharing the experience of hearing live classical music for the first time with classmates and teachers is a powerful event for which there is no substitute. That's why North Carolina musicians insist on playing their best, every time, no matter what, no matter how many times. That's why they pack their suitcases and their instruments.

That's why they get on the bus.