

ROMANTICS

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"Much better," he encourages.

He lifts his baton and the Gulf Coast Symphony continues their exploration of Tchaikovsky's 6th Symphony, "Symphonie Pathétique."

It's a Tuesday night, and the all-volunteer orchestra's rehearsing for their upcoming Dec. 15 Classical Access Concert at Bishop Verot High School. In addition to performing this piece, which was Tchaikovsky's final symphony, they'll perform his "Variations on a Roco Theme" (with guest cellist Ian Maksin) and Rachmaninoff's "The Isle of the Dead."

But right now, they're in the auditorium of a Fort Myers outpatient services building, rehearsing. The space feels like a high school cafeteria with accordion-like moveable walls, and instrument cases, purses and jackets strewn on the tables.

"What's great about this orchestra is it's a true reflection of our community," says Kurtz during a break. "Everyone in our orchestra lives here, works here, has retired here, is a consumer here. Several people we know who moved specifically to Fort Myers, one of their requirements was a community orchestra."

Participants in the orchestra — now beginning its 13th season — come from three different counties: Charlotte, Lee and Collier.

"People here are retired professional musicians, music teachers," says Kurtz. "And a dozen doctors play with us, and a few students."

Ages range from 15 to 80s.

The orchestra also has nationally known guest artists perform in concert with them.

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—Andrew Kurtz, Gulf Coast Symphony

lenging as any orchestra's," Kurtz says.

"It's very challenging," agrees Lori Poynter of Olga, who plays the French horn. This is her fifth season with the orchestra. "He challenges us more every year," she says. "We look at the music and say, 'There ain't no way.' But then we rise to the occasion."

Poynter took up the horn again after not playing for 23 years. She began playing at her church, Grace United Methodist in Cape Coral. A fellow band member at the church told her about Gulf Coast Symphony.

"And I thought, 'That's a new opportunity.'" So she joined. "There are some very fine-playing musicians in this group that wouldn't have any place to play otherwise," Poynter says.

And she landed a temporary job playing in the pit for "Oklahoma!" at the Broadway Palm Dinner Theatre. "I did 22 performances," she says. "Playing (in this orchestra) presents other opportunities. A paying gig!"

Kurtz, a violinist with the Southwest Florida Symphony, founded Gulf Coast Symphony in January 1996 and continues to serve as its Music Director and conductor. The orchestra began with three or four concerts a year at the Barbara B. Mann Performing Arts Hall. They now do 11 concerts a year in a



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO

The all-volunteer Gulf Coast Symphony rehearses at Southwest Regional Medical Center for their upcoming Dec. 15 Classical Access Concert at Bishop Verot High School.

variety of venues: four pops/Symphonic Sensations concerts at the Mann Hall, two Classical Access concerts at Bishop Verot, three free family concerts at the Sam Galloway Ford Dealership and two free outdoor pops concerts at the new Estero Community Park.

"Our one and only mission is education: the further education of the people in this orchestra, the concerts we do in the community," Kurtz says. "Our concerts are designed to provide access to the symphony for first-timers and classical music lovers. We want to provide the means to get a deeper understanding of what they're listening for and to."

The orchestra also works closely with a dozen schools throughout Lee County.

"We teach them about the artistic process," he says. "Our concept is to work as a partner with the schoolteacher, to give additional information, additional materials, and additional access beyond what they get in the classroom."

When they send their guest artists to work in the classroom with the teacher, they may give a master class or a mini-performance.

"We individualize with the teacher to fit their needs," Kurtz says. They also provide free tickets to students and their parents to attend concerts. And, Kurtz notes, the tickets are for the best seats in the house.

"We want them to experience a concert as well as someone else would," he says. "We have had kids who have come back. This is our 13th season, and some of these kids, we've made a profound difference in their life. Each school gets up to two artist visits a year. Twelve schools, that's 24 artist visits."

The symphony is financially very healthy with a budget over \$250,000, says Kurtz.

"We have sponsorships from various people in the community. The orchestra wouldn't exist without the volunteers. Half our concerts are free. We get support from the medical community. They underwrite the cost. Symphonius Medicus, doctors for classical healing, and another anonymous donor underwrite the Access Classical

Concerts. And Sam Galloway underwrites 50 percent of the cost of the family concerts. The rest of the money comes from grants and other private foundations."

Why did he start Gulf Coast Symphony?

"...Because there was a need," Kurtz says. "It's my best expression of who I am and how I communicate. Music is a universal form of communication, a universal language that can touch anyone and everyone. I'm driven. I'm passionate about sharing this. The arts are what complete us as human beings, as a society. Otherwise, it's all work. Once you get beyond subsistence, there's a real need for being creative."

That passion and drive is obvious to the musicians.

"He cares about the music," says Dr. Eleanor Blitzer, a Cape Coral pediatrician who's played viola with the symphony since it began. "He's always about making music. It's not: did you play the piece exactly? At our concerts, he always explains what we're doing to the audience."

"Andrew Kurtz is a phenomenal conductor, adds Phil Lefton of South Fort Myers, a retired schoolteacher who plays violin. He points out that in addition to being a violinist in his own right, Kurtz teaches and conducts every summer at the Luzerne Music Center. He's also founding Musical Director of the Florida Jewish Philharmonic Orchestra, one of only two orchestras in the US dedicated to performing music of Jewish performers and is the founder and Artistic Director of the Center City Opera Theater in Philadelphia.

"He's the key to our orchestra," Lefton says. "He's inspiring. He knows what he's doing. He conducts well. He knows what it's like to be in an orchestra because he's in the Southwest Florida Symphony."

Kurtz rehearses the Gulf Shore Symphony the way a sculptor fashions a figure from marble. First he gets the general shape, then he refines it.

"They get the basics to it, then it's adding layers of sophistication," Kurtz says. "My overreaching goal, always, is to make music. Missing a note is not a tragedy. Not being musical is a travesty." ■



The Art League of Fort Myers

The Art League of Fort Myers contributes to the cultural life of the community by promoting fine art to all. It operates many programs that provide encouragement and learning opportunities in the arts for adults and children in the Fort Myers area. The League's "Art-at-Noon" lectures and demonstrations take place on the first Monday of each month. There are also, Plein-Aire painting excursions and free "Open-Paint" on Wednesdays at the gallery at 1451 Monroe Street, in the heart of the River District.

The League provides other low cost art instruction opportunities to its members, and the public. It participates in the community by providing art supplies and assistance to Mary's House of Hope, and offers arts scholarships to school children.

Several famous artists demonstrate, and hold classes that are open to the public, at the League offices on Monroe Street.. Gail Bennett, the acclaimed impressionist painter from Giverny, France, and Tom Jones, the watercolorist featured in Artists' Magazine are but two of many that will appear in the coming year. Our President Jan-ellen Atkielski will present her workshop, "The Business of Art" once again. It's a professional development class designed to help all levels of artists manage a career in the arts. Topics will include: portfolio preparation, resume writing, marketing plans, and a manageable accounting method for artists.

Each four to six weeks, the League holds either a judged or juried exhibition. Receptions held usually on Friday at 6pm open each exhibit. These are open to the public at our Monroe Street gallery. Upcoming shows are: "Small Packages" in December, and the juried "River District" and "Odd Object" show in January-March. The exhibits consist of original art from local artists at reasonable prices. Jack O'Brien and Greg Biolchini are among the judges for those shows.

For more information visit us at www.artleagueoffm@embarq.com. The League used the SW Florida Community Foundation Arts & Attractions Fund Grant for this advertisement. Copy by Jan-ellen Atkielski.

