

Venice Symphony: Big music in a small town

By Pam Johnson

Venice is known as the small, historic city on the gulf with big-city cultural amenities. One organization contributing to that reputation is the Venice Symphony.

The Venice Symphony Orchestra was founded in 1973, but three years later changed its name to Suncoast Symphony Orchestra.

In those early years about 35 - 60 musicians gathered at 3 p.m. on three Sundays during the winter season at the Venice High School auditorium where they played under the direction of Hartley W. Haines.

Haines was the director of music in the public schools and had performed with the State Symphony of Florida, State Opera Association and Florida West Coast Symphony when he took on the task of being the local orchestra's first conductor.

The Florida State University School of Music graduate found himself before a stage of volunteer musicians, one as old as 85 and one as young as 8. Although the admission was free, the patrons were proud and enthusiastic.

The first concertmaster was Joyce Hoefer, who continued to play violin in the orchestra until 2011. She remembers the first rehearsal in the fall of 1973.



The Venice Orchestra performs in 1974 at Venice High School.

Photo courtesy of Venice Museum and Archives

"We met in the orchestra room at the high school. Hartley invited three musicians from the West Coast Symphony in Sarasota who lived in Venice. Some of his students also participated. My daughter, Karen, was one of them," she recalled.

Both mother and daughter played the first performance. Karen Hoefer Tuttle is now the first violist for the orchestra.

Her mother recalls clearly the orchestra's first concert was Jan. 19, 1974 - it was Karen's 11th birthday.

"One thing that helped us when we were just starting out is that the high school had a library of music we could use," Hoefer says.

Around 1983, Haines left the school and the symphony orchestra.

Ernesto Epistola, a cellist, was hired by the school board to be the orchestra director and strings teacher at the Venice high and middle schools. Symphony board member Barbara Bregman encouraged Epistola to audition

for the conductor position at the symphony.

"Barbara was a powerhouse," he remembers. Epistola was selected to lead the mostly volunteer orchestra to the next level. He continued as the maestro until 1988.

His classroom was located in the "new" middle school on Center Road. That became the symphony orchestra's rehearsal hall.

"The chairs and music stands were already set up," Epistola recalls. "Performances were at the high school. We were at the mercy of the custodians. They had to set up the chairs and set the stage before every performance."

"The musicians had a committee to select the music we played," Epistola said. "Some of the music was challenging - not high school music. It was a community affair. We had some retired musicians who had played in big orchestras in other parts of the country and some students."

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"The orchestra had an outreach program for kids," Epistola said. "I invited professional musicians to teach kids the basics of string playing. Soloists were not paid much, but we did have some come from nearby colleges. One of my former students came from California to perform."

In 1987, John Kalajian, an attorney and future city council member, was elected president of the symphony board, with Bregman, Anne Wise and Edward Schmidt serving as vice presidents. Other board members included Marijane Rouvet, Lee Burns, Eileen Arnold, Edward Knob, Kenneth Blount, Irene DeLorme, Greg Colby, Dr. Martin Romanski and Ann Runyan. That year, the orchestra became the Venice Symphony once again and raised ticket prices from \$3 to \$10 per concert.

"How many towns the size of Venice have the privilege of a performing, classical orchestra of their own?" Kalajian was quoted in the newspaper referring to Venice's population of almost 15,000.

The orchestra drew from a pool of local talent. A 1988 Herald-Tribune article by Dorothy Stockbridge stated the impressive backgrounds of several of the orchestra's musicians. According to the article, clarinetist Harry Phillips was a college music professor in New York before coming to Florida where he taught at Manatee Community College (now State College of Florida). Trumpet player Joe Martinez

taught music in Sarasota and conducted the Florida West Coast Symphony. (Martinez still plays with the symphony today.) Trombonist Stephen Terry taught orchestra in Manatee schools.

Cellists Frank Salerno and Dorothy Cole played professionally, Cole in the Minneapolis civic orchestra. Albert Myerson, a Ph.D. scientist played in symphony orchestras in Philadelphia, Buffalo and Plainfield, N.J. Violinist Andy Zingaro was a former educator from New York and violinist Ernie St. Jacques, was concertmaster of the Holyoke, Mass., Civic Symphony and taught at Holyoke Community College. Other members of the orchestra that year included Venice High School students Anthony Accardi, Larry Strejcek, Tracy Music and Daniela Heider.

In 1989, Wesley John Schumacher took the director's baton. He ended his first season with a performance of Poet and Peasant Overture.

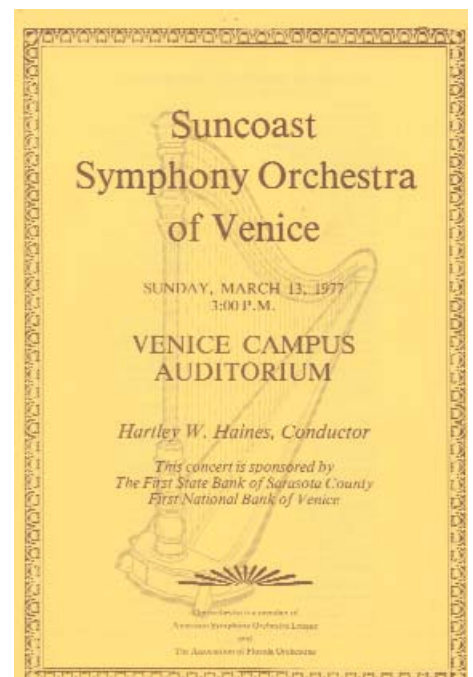
"This is an old chestnut, but Maestro Schumacher breathed new life into it," music reviewer for the Gondolier newspaper Kenneth Blount wrote.

"Maestro Schumacher made the evening an entertaining event by his enthusiasm and his talent. He obviously enjoys what he is doing and the audience senses this. Artistically, this has been a successful first season for him and the orchestra is lucky to have him."

"The new conductor was very good at fundraising," Epistola



This poster announced the premiere performance of the Venice Symphony in 1974. Below is a program cover from 1977. Courtesy of Venice Museum and Archives.



said. "That was what the symphony needed."

"Wes worked very hard. He got a larger music program in the schools and got people to sponsor the concerts," Hoefler said.

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Schumacher had moved from Illinois, where he was a high school band instructor. He was hired by the Venice-Nokomis United Methodist Church to serve as minister of music and lead the choir before being invited to take on the leadership of the symphony orchestra.

He held a monthly preview of the upcoming symphony concert to educate audiences about the music they would hear. He also briefly introduced pieces with historical information in an entertaining manner on the night of the concert. He was actively engaged in marketing the organization.

Judy Bacon was a member of the Venice-Nokomis United Methodist Church choir when Schumacher became its director. Bacon, who was a symphony board member, encouraged Schumacher to try out for the conductor position when it became available. For most of the six years she served on the board, Bacon ran the ticket sales for the symphony from her home computer.

"Wes had charisma, talent, enthusiasm and musical knowledge," Bacon said. "To me, he

brought life to the symphony. One of the first things he did is to go to the downtown merchants and ask for money to purchase music for his first concert."

Schumacher was good at garnering the interest of the community, Bacon said. "He had the church choir sing with the symphony and by doing so enlarged the audience and the general interest in the symphony," she said.

Bacon recalls Schumacher's enhancement of the student outreach program.

"Wes and Eric Watters went to the schools with a program for third-graders that essentially taught them about various instruments in the orchestra during a series of classes throughout the year," she said. Schumacher was also known for his "hose and bottle" show performed for the third-graders, pre-school children, and even adults to help them understand how sounds can be turned into music.

"Eric started putting on his one-man show every year to raise money for the education program," Bacon said. Later, Watters

served as the symphony's board chairman, as well.

Violinist Joyce Hoefer was still playing with the orchestra when Schumacher became conductor.

"I think we got better every year," she said. "But one dynamic change was when Dick Adams and Paul Chalfant became co-concert masters. The quality seemed to improve a lot. And then, better musicians wanted to join."

Adams and Chalfant did a wonderful job of rehearsing the strings, bringing them to a new level of mastery, Hoefer noted.

Another memorable concert master was Alfred Gershfeld, who moved from Russia, where he conducted the Bolshoi Ballet Orchestra.

"His English was hard to understand, so his wife, who had been an English teacher in Russia would come to the rehearsals and translate for him," Hoefer remembers.

In 1990, the symphony board hired Jean Peters as executive director.



Today, the Venice Symphony plays 8 concerts in 24 performances during the winter season.

Photo courtesy of The Venice Symphony

Venice Symphony, continued

Peters followed former Jacobson and Sandra Watters. Sandra's former husband and Eric's brother, Carl, continued to set up and take down furnishings and props until his untimely death in 2010.

As the city grew to almost 22,000 people so did the symphony. Schumacher not only attracted a larger audience, he also attracted more high-caliber musicians. He moved the performances from the high school auditorium to the Church of the Nazarene on East Venice Avenue. The new venue allowed comfortable seats for 650 people and good acoustics for the music.

"Jean is a self starter and can do anything," Bacon said. As the Church of the Nazarene was being built, there were many meetings about how its structure and interior would accommodate the classical music concerts.

"Jean said, 'this is a nice, classy place and we need to have a classy symphony,'" Bacon remembered.

Peters even gave the musicians a new look.

"That was when the musicians began wearing tuxedos and all black. Even the ushers wore tuxedos. Jean is a great organizer and a great idea person."

Peters brought with her 20 years of volunteer experience with larger symphony orchestras in Rockford, Ill., Cincinnati, Ohio, and Des Moines, Iowa. She picked up the ticket sales from Bacon, and continued to sell them and market the symphony from her home computer.

In 2012, as Peters prepared to retire after 21 years of service to the organization, the symphony had an office on the third floor above the Gondolier newspaper, downtown.

"The thing I think is so wonderful is how this symphony has grown," Peters said. "When I started there were four concerts with two performances each. Today, there are six concerts with three performances each, a free outdoor concert in the park, an outdoor concert at State College of Florida, and a children's concert.

"What I think is exciting is the new performing arts center. It will be wonderful for the whole community," Peters said.

The Venice Performing Arts Center is being created as a result of a partnership between the City of Venice and Sarasota County School Board, as part of the rebuilding of Venice High School. The state-of-the-art performance center will be completed in 2014.

The school will use it for their music and drama classes by day and by night, organizations such as the Venice Symphony, Venice Concert Band, and Suncoast Chorale. It will accommodate 1,000 people in its audience, and will have an excellent sound system, staging and other amenities.

In 2009, Schumacher retired and violinist Ken Bowermeister was selected to serve as conductor. He is the former conductor of Sarasota Pops Orchestra, Florida West Coast Youth Sym-

phony, and the Florida West Coast Symphonic Strings and College Chamber Orchestra. He was guest conductor with the Florida West Coast Symphony, Florida Chamber Orchestra and International Festival Orchestra in Oxford, England. Bowermeister taught music and conducted the orchestra at Pine View School. He conducted the Florida All-State Seventh- and Eighth-Grade Orchestra in 2002 and many Florida State University summer music camps.

Like a circle, all things end at the beginning and go on from there.

Ernesto Epistola's daughter, Angela Hart-Vigsen, took violin lessons at Pine View School from Ken Bowermeister, the current conductor.

"I hope she will play with the Venice Symphony someday," Epistola said.

In 2014, the orchestra will move to its new home - back where they began - at Venice High School, in the modern Venice Performing Arts Center.

*For more information:
(941) 488-1010 or visit
www.thevenicesymphony.org.*