

Long Distance Maestro:

From Tacoma, conductor lends expertise to Southwest Washington Wind Symphony

By Scott Hewitt, Columbian Arts & Features Reporter.

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It's not unusual for an orchestra to work with two different conductors while preparing a concert. The rehearsal conductor drills the nuts and bolts; the performance conductor can arrive later, listen with bigger ears and think less about mechanics and more about overall artistic vision. "If you stick with one coach or one conductor for too long, you might get too comfortable," said Peter Boulé, president and saxophonist with the 55-member Southwest Washington Wind Symphony. "When you bring in a new person who has fresh, different ideas, it brings new energy and new focus."

What is unusual is a conductor working closely with an orchestra, live and in real time, from 140 miles away. That's the distance from Mountain View High School in Vancouver, where music teacher Sam Ormson started rehearsing the group, to the Tacoma home of University of Puget Sound associate professor of music Gerard Morris. Morris has been consulting and critiquing the group remotely — and will take over as performance conductor, in person, during in a free concert set for 3 p.m. Sunday at Union High School.



Bringing the conductors and players together has been JamKazam, software designed to let musicians enjoy high-quality sound while collaborating over the internet. During a recent rehearsal, Ormson stood at the podium while the face of Morris floated on a screen above him. If that seemed a little weird at first, it quickly turned businesslike. The two conductors had a lot of material to review. "Nobody has done this before, that we know of," Ormson said. "It's a journey through technology, and it's real-world relevant."

Sixty percent of the players in the Southwest Washington Wind Symphony are teachers who earn continuing-education credit for participating in the group; experimenting with technology like this is an "outstanding educational experience for them and something they might be able to use with their students," Boulé said. "The next time you do a clinic session, before you take your group to a festival, you can get another set of ears."

Internet communication is also a great way to connect with talents who would otherwise be out of reach, Ormson added: "How else do you get a great composer or conductor to work with your group if they live someplace like New York City?" Or even Tacoma. "Without this we'd never be able to have Gerard, because he couldn't drive down here for weeks in a row," Boulé said. The first attempt to rehearse remotely was via video-conferencing program Skype — but "I couldn't hear anything," Morris quickly discovered. Skype is optimized for voice conversations; the volume and dynamic range of orchestra sound just didn't come through. JamKazam turned out to be the solution, but Morris said the information technology experts on his campus were worried about security, so they set him up with the Ethernet cable he needed at home. "I don't feel any lack of intimacy," Morris said of his distance-consulting experience. "Just the opposite, this connects you even more and makes the world even smaller."

Technology for life

Ironically enough, the theme for this technology-driven concert is “Songs of Life,” and it features favorites by Leonard Bernstein, Aaron Copland, Jake Runestad and William Grant Still. Still (1895-1978) was a fascinating and prolific figure in American musical history: He’s considered the first major classical African-American composer, and was the first American to have an original opera performed by the New York City Opera and broadcast on national television. The South-



west Washington Wind Symphony will play Still’s best-known work, his Symphony No. 1, the so-called “Afro-American Symphony” (1931), which includes the familiar rhythms and chord progressions of the blues.

Jake Runestad is a contemporary composer based in Minnesota, where mountains are few and far between, but his new piece “Rivers of Air” was inspired by hiking in Washington’s Mount Rainier National Park. “Visions of expansive mountain ranges from thousands of feet in the air, the rushing Nisqually River and the profound sacredness of old growth trees guided me as I wrote,” Runestad has written. “In an age when humans seem to be continuously separating ourselves from the earth and from each other, (John) Muir’s words remind us to listen deeply to all that is around us; and in that listening, we too can see (and hear) our own rivers of air.”

You might think that classical musicians and technology geeks don’t overlap much — and you’d mostly be right, Boulé said. But Morris asserted that there shouldn’t be any conflict. “People who aren’t thinking about technology aren’t doing the future of our art form any service,” he said. “The technology is here. It’s our job as human beings to figure out how we’re going to use it.”

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