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Round-Up the unusual suspects

# Two months after a disastrous fire guts its offices, Pendleton's unlikely symphony orchestra gives Mahler the ride of his life

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**The Oregonian**

PENDLETON -- The invitation from the Oregon East Symphony screamed, "Are you kidding me?"

"We would like to invite you to come to our next concert on Sunday, May 13, at 3:00 in Pendleton, at the Vert Auditorium, to hear us perform the Mahler Symphony No. 1 under the direction of our conductor, Ken Woods of Wales."

Mahler in Pendleton? Conducted by a guy from Wales? With an orchestra that lost its entire music library -- 21 years' worth of collected scores, the road maps to every piece of music the orchestra plays -- in a fire last March? And that proudly calls itself "the best goddamn redneck orchestra in the world"?

Wild horses couldn't keep me away.

## Run, laugh or yell

So here I am in Pendleton, watching an orchestra climb back on its horse. Not a friendly horse, either. More like a wild stallion, unpredictable and scary. Mahler 1, after all, is a mighty thing for any orchestra. They don't call it "Titan" by chance.

The first rehearsal, four days before the performance, confirms my fears. The sound is excruciating -- wrong notes, squawks and wayward strings. The oboist makes faces at her mangled notes. A trumpet player flubs entire passages. A couple of violinists stop playing altogether, shrugging their shoulders and laughing.

The task ahead seems impossible. It's too big and too hard for these mostly young, inexperienced or just plain rusty players. It sounds as if Mahler's been dragged through the mud.

The music should sound heroic and brilliant, deep and brooding, depicting a young man's struggle to make sense out of life. It's a map of the stars where, along the way, he encounters nature, love, death and, ultimately, glory.

Mahler 1 takes an hour to play and calls for an orchestra twice Pendleton's size -- ideally 100 -- with an ending unlike any other symphony. As the music swells to its triumphant close, Mahler instructs all eight French horn players to leap to their feet and drown out the orchestra, "even the trumpets." It's mad, sad, glorious music.

But the Oregon East Symphony is seriously underpowered. The core group of players numbers about 40, so in the days before the concert, roundup calls go to Portland, Seattle, Spokane, Boise and Walla Walla. Still, they're short. Instead of 32 violins, 16 show up. Instead of 14 violas, four play. Instead of 12 basses, they have four. Some players can make only one rehearsal. The eighth and last French horn player won't make any. He'll arrive an hour before the concert and sight-read his part -- an unheard-of arrangement, but

acceptable because he's known as a reliable player.

Faced with such conditions, many conductors would run, or laugh, or yell. Kenneth Woods remains upbeat.

"Lovely everyone, bravo," he says after they slog through the fourth and final movement. "Breathe, everybody. Eyes up here."

After 21/2 hours of stop-start-stop-start, Woods closes with: "Well done. Thank you all. See you tomorrow night."

**Not for the money**

The orchestra takes over the town. Visiting musicians fill restaurants, bars and shops such as Hamley's, the 127-year-old saddle-maker that sells cowboy boots soft as lambs' lips. Main Street feels like a festival. "Dude, it is a festival," a friend tells Woods.

It certainly feels like one at the Rainbow, a 100-year-old bar where players gather after evening rehearsals to swap stories and wolf down fried chicken, onion rings and beer. Through the cigarette smoke and curses of pool players behind them, I begin to sense how important this orchestra is to them.

"I put this group on my calendar before I do anything else," says James Smock, 28, a freelance trumpet player from Vancouver, and one of the group's stronger players. "When you freelance, you play in a lot of different orchestras. A lot of times, the impression you get is, they're playing at 75 percent. This orchestra, every concert is a special occasion. It's 150 percent. It's the whole reason you play music."

His girlfriend, Rebekah Schaub, agrees. "They just throw themselves into a performance more than any other group," says the 26-year-old French horn player. "They fight for every bit of art that comes in here. There's less sense of entitlement."

In other words, Pendleton's orchestra gives even career musicians the meaning and passion that they miss elsewhere. They don't do it for the money: Pay ranges from volunteer to $50 per service (rehearsals and the concert), with up to $75 travel reimbursement. The Oregon Symphony pays freelancers $170 per service.

Doug Westervelt, a violist who runs his own Internet company in Portland, could have been playing for opera superstar Renee Fleming in Eugene -- and earning a lot more money -- but he chose instead to make the 450-mile round-trip here.

"These guys have been through something tough, and I just love them," he says.

**Loss stuns orchestra**

The March 15 fire complicates things, to be sure. At first, no one thought the blaze was serious, even when firetrucks from Umatilla, Pilot Rock and Hermiston showed up. Smoke billowed from the symphony office. Crowds gathered. They knew it was bad when flames shot through the roof and out the door.

The blaze started in a popcorn machine two doors down, and although no one was hurt, flames and water destroyed the symphony office and its library. The loss stunned the young orchestra. Gone were more than two decades' worth of music: the scores for symphonies by Beethoven, Brahms and Tchaikovsky. Thousands of hours of lost labor in hand-marked fingerings and bowings. Computers, files, furniture and a piano -- ruined.

Woods was in Cardiff when he heard. He spent the day in shock. Now, two months later, he's in Pendleton for the first time since the fire, stepping gingerly over charred 2x4s and fallen ceiling tiles. Lights lie in a melted lump. A singed copy of "Messiah" rests in the ashes. Waterlogged scores bulge on shelves. The smell of burnt paper lingers in the morning air.

"There aren't many more challenging locations than Pendleton to have a symphony," he says, sweat beading

his forehead. "Of all the groups I work with, this one is the least able to take something harder."

Woods' cello and guitar survived the fire. Less expensive than the cello, but more valuable to him, was the guitar, which he'd had since he was 13. He majored in cello at Indiana University, but not many people know that he also played lead guitar in rock and jazz bands, covering songs by Jimi Hendrix and Stevie Ray Vaughan in small towns in Indiana and Kentucky. Conducting eventually took over, though.

Sometimes, a disaster shows where you stand. Within a week of the fire, somebody donated a trailer as an office. Others gave computers, furniture, a piano. Local kids raised $1,300 in a penny drive. Insurance will cover maybe $30,000 of the $150,000 loss.

When word spread, symphony librarians around the country donated music, including the retired librarian at the Philadelphia Orchestra who bought a complete set of Mahler parts and mailed them to Pendleton.

The May concert, which some locals assumed was off, was back on.

**No business being here**

The second rehearsal goes only marginally better than the first. More players have arrived, but the strings are still woefully short. Woods pushes for more expression, more intensity. The playing needs to sound youthful -- buoyant and athletic.

"Ten times as much here, strings," he begs.

"Trumpets, could that be 80 times as loud?"

At 38, Woods looks like a younger, dark-haired William Hurt, only not as depressed. He grew up in Madison, Wis., but lives in Cardiff because his wife has a good gig playing violin in the BBC National Orchestra of Wales. Eight times a year, he flies from Cardiff to London to Newark to Portland to Pendleton. It's crazy, and on the plane, he often wonders why he does it.

"You become invested in the people," he says. "I work harder in rehearsals here than anywhere else. They need a lot from me because of the incredible range of ability. What ends up happening, every trip here has a defining moment. This is why I come back. The orchestra has no business being here. 'Welcome to Round-Up Town.' Mahler has no business being here. But we've stuck to our guns. A lot of curious, worldly people live in Pendleton."

Woods has conducted the Pendleton orchestra for seven years and he understands the musicians' relationship with it. "The range of technical standards is enormous, from professional to rank amateurs. At the end of the day, you have to balance quality with those who want to play and enjoy it."

Woods, who schleps platforms to the auditorium in a borrowed pickup truck, says he plans to stick around. "It's really important the orchestra get better. It's my life's work. I'm doing this not just as a stepping stone."

**Crunch time**

Saturday, the day before the concert, is crunch time. From 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Woods drills the woodwinds, brass and strings on notes and style in separate sectional rehearsals. That night, he takes them through the entire symphony one last run time. They grind out each movement.

"Fifty times as much here, strings. No, 150 times as much. It's gotta be murderous."

"Viciously mocking, please."

"Can you be the voice of God, here?"

Shoulders slump in exhaustion. The lips of the brass players are shot. A clarinet player rubs her neck.

And then that defining moment happens. At 7:52 p.m. -- Woods notes it on his watch -- the orchestra creates a moment of magical loveliness, brief and breathtaking.

"It's the most beautiful sound I've ever heard them make," he says, later. "And nobody heard it."

**"You mean they let you play?"**

Cultural assumptions come easily in this dusty cowboy town nestled against the Blue Mountains. Pendleton may be associated with pioneers, the Oregon Trail, brothels, the real Hop Sing and, of course, the Round-Up, the annual rodeo that triples the population to 55,000.

But Pendleton, population 17,000 counting the prison, is one of only three towns in the eastern two-thirds of the state with a string program in the school district. Classical music is actually more accessible here than in a big city. The symphony lets in people who may have thought their playing days were over.

People like Dr. Cheryl Marier, an ob/gyn, who is also the symphony's board president, a city councilor and, at $10,000 this year, the ensemble's largest individual donor. Marier, who has delivered a generation of Pendleton babies, gave up private practice for several years to take over the orchestra. Two years ago, she started playing oboe again after raising two daughters.

"I was really scared, but they needed somebody," she says. "The music part became more and more important to me."

And people like John Wilson, a big, affable guy who lives on 40 acres on the Umatilla Indian Reservation east of town. Wilson maintains the equipment that alerts residents if there's a chemical leak at the Umatilla Weapons Depot. Sometimes, that means climbing 140-foot communication towers -- when there's no lightning.

Not many orchestras have to worry about their percussion player getting zapped by lightning.

Wilson hadn't banged a drum since 1978, but he got talked into leading the percussion section when the orchestra needed someone.

"You mean they let you play?" he remembers thinking.

Michelle Kajikawa, 29, is also surprised to be playing again. She burned out on the French horn in college and got into social work with prisoners. She and her husband moved from Portland to Pendleton in 2004 after her husband, Reid, passed the bar exam and needed a job. The town's public defender needed a young lawyer.

One night, Reid, who plays the bassoon, came home from symphony rehearsal. "It's kind of neat and they have a conductor from Wales," he told Michelle. She was unconvinced until she heard they were doing Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony without a fourth horn.

"They can't play Shostakovich 5 with three horns!" she cried. So she showed up at the dress rehearsal, nervous because she hadn't touched the horn in four years.

Don't worry about it, Woods told her.

"I can't say it was spectacular, but it was OK," she says. "I had a nice time and I remember that Ken wasn't yelling."

Today, Kajikawa runs the orchestra, heading a staff of three out of the temporary trailer.

So here's another thing about classical music in small towns. If Marier, Wilson and Kajikawa hadn't shown

up, their parts would have gone unplayed. Certain responsibilities come with living here.

"You get involved with things you wouldn't in a bigger city," Marier says.

**Playing through the fear**

Woods arrives an hour before the concert, a sunny Mother's Day afternoon. His parents have flown in from Madison. The stage extends three feet into the hall to accommodate the extra players.

When the music begins, it's "dawn." The entire string section whispers the note A, from the top of the violins to the lowest octave of the basses. Against the "sound of silence," woodwinds coo to one another, a "nature" motive that rustles through the section.

The stillness needs to hypnotize listeners, but the players sound nervous, their entrances tentative. They miss notes they nailed the night before.

Ever so gradually the music increases, a series of tiny events -- a short horn duet, a soft rumble from the timpani. Bits of tunes join the music's lazy progress until the orchestra shakes itself awake with a thudding bass drum and a trumpet fanfare that slices through the hush.

They're playing better now, more convincingly.

The second movement, a catchy peasant dance, settles them down for the difficult third movement, a grab bag of sarcastic Jewish music, pub ditties, "Salvation Army" percussion with boom-chick drum and cymbal and a creepy version of "Freres Jacques."

"The symphony must be the world," Mahler said. "It must embrace everything."

Now comes the hard part, a violent scream that rips open the fourth movement. It's wild and scary, but the strings grab hold of it more or less as one group, enough to create a hysterical effect. Trumpets sneer and cackle in the tumult.

"This is a symphony about a young man declaring himself," Woods told the audience before starting.

But it's also about a young orchestra declaring itself. No one's mind is on the fire anymore. Note by note, the piece takes over, sounding more like Mahler by the moment. They tune in to each other, pushing through the stress, fatigue, doubt, fear. It's not a perfect performance, but no one cares.

To joyously pounding timpani, eight horn players -- including Kajikawa, who once thought she'd never play again -- stand and deliver the final blare of brass.

The audience is on its feet, and Woods has tears in his eyes. So do many of the players.

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