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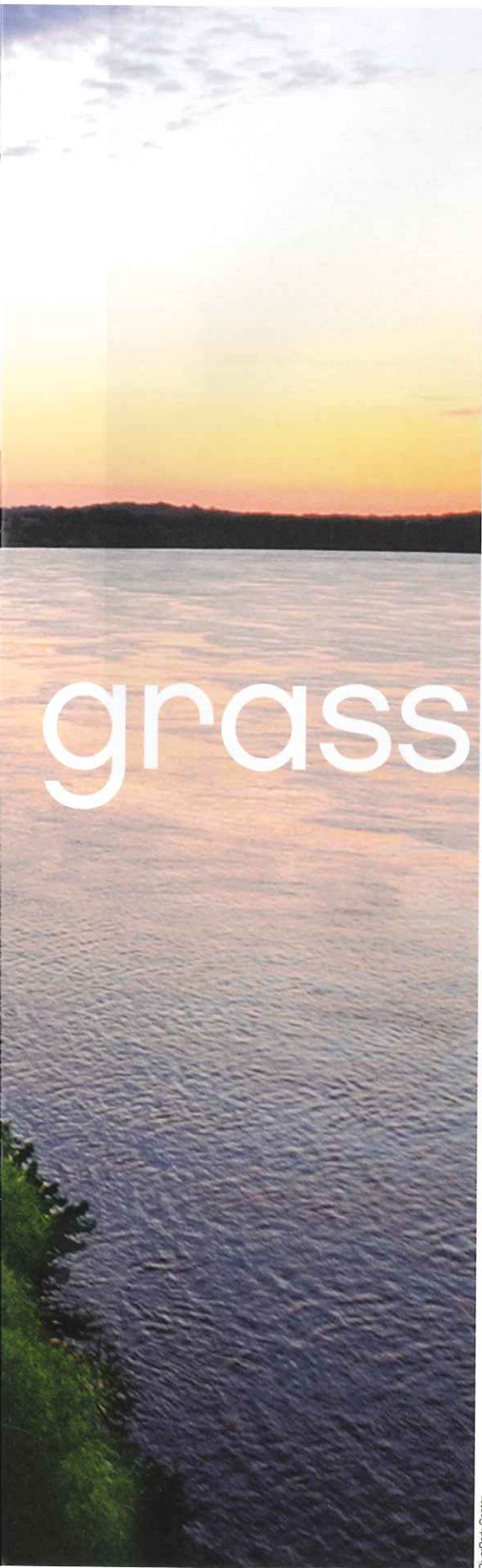
Musician-Managers: From Instrument Case to Brief Case



Blue

By raising artistic standards and forging solid relationships with its community, the Owensboro Symphony Orchestra has made Beethoven king in the land of bluegrass and BBQ.

RiverPark Center, on the Ohio River, is the venue for many of the Owensboro Symphony's concerts.



It's about 6 p.m. on a muggy August Saturday, and the Moonlite Bar-B-Q Inn is in the midst of its typical weekend feeding frenzy. Famished customers cluster around the buffet, heaping their plates with beef brisket, chicken, pork ribs, and Western Kentucky's singular contribution to the barbecue pantheon: slow-roasted mutton.

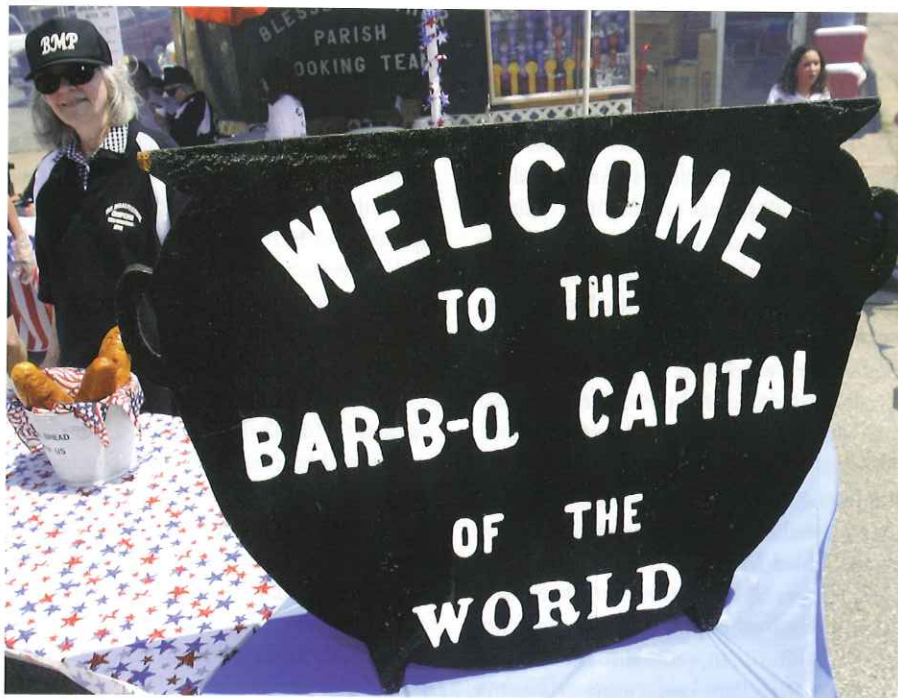
Just a few steps away, seventeen-year-old Erin Ballard stands ready to wipe up any bits of food that stray from their appointed pans. A senior at Owensboro Catholic High School, she's steeped in the ways of this culinary landmark. But on this particular evening, her enthusiasm is directed at another local cultural icon: the Owensboro Symphony Orchestra. "My friend is Oliver Palmer, and his father is Nicholas Palmer, the conductor," Erin said, moving nimbly to avoid a passing tray overflowing with macaroni and cheese. "He's a really cool guy. I'm a big music person—I'm in march-

ing band at school," she continues, praising the orchestra for performances ranging "from patriotic to classical" genres. "I know a lot of people who listen to their concerts."

Ballard is hardly alone. The Owensboro Symphony is inextricably linked to the identity of this city, in ways that transcend the traditional relationship between music and municipality. It may be a part-time ensemble, but it's very much a full-time presence. To understand how this orchestra works, and why it's become so essential to the community around it, you need to appreciate the character of its host city. Located about 100 miles west of Louisville, tucked away alongside the Ohio River, Owensboro is home to approximately 55,000 residents, making it the state's third-largest urban area. The river, a vast waterway separating Kentucky from Indiana, has for generations helped define the city's commercial evolution.

grass Symphony

by Andrew Adler



RiverPark Center

Owensboro Daviess County Convention & Visitors Bureau



The Owensboro Symphony Orchestra, with Music Director and Conductor Nicholas Palmer and the Owensboro Symphony Chorus, at an April 2010 performance of *Carmina Burana* at RiverPark Center's Cannon Hall

Owensboro Symphony Orchestra

Owensboro is centered along Frederica Street, a broad thoroughfare that begins barely a block from the river and extends southward for miles until it transforms itself into US Route 431. It's an eclectic, often contradictory expanse of streetscape and highway, where refined stateliness often butts up against honk-if-you-love-riblets urban sprawl, a place where the Owensboro Museum of Fine Art gives way to Big River Rubber & Gasket. That said, Owensboro boasts a richness, indeed, an authenticity, that maintains a balance between city and country sensibilities. It's overwhelmingly white (more than 90 percent), and once was decidedly blue-collar.

Industrial might once ruled here: General Electric employed thousands. Now the local economy is far more service-based, particularly in healthcare. The Owensboro Medical Health System, for instance, occupies a vast tract of ground along Parrish Avenue—the same busy street that's home to the fabled Moonlite Inn.

Outsiders tend to associate Owensboro with a kind of populist streak, reflecting what Zev Buffman, president and CEO of the city's [RiverPark](#) performing arts center,

calls “the line of thinking that barbecue and bluegrass rule.” There's some truth in that. Indeed, the International Bluegrass Music Museum is one of the area's principal attractions. Besides the Museum of Fine Art, the city boasts the Owensboro Museum of Science & History, several college-based arts programs, and the Theater Workshop of Louisville (with repertoire ranging from *5 Guys Named Moe* to *Lettice and Lovage*).

Yet classical music has long held its own here, and prospered, against more small-city cultural norms. The orchestra began operating in 1919, incorporating in 1967 as the Owensboro Civic Orchestra. For years it gave concerts inside a high school auditorium, striving to produce a grand sound in a decidedly less-than-grand space.

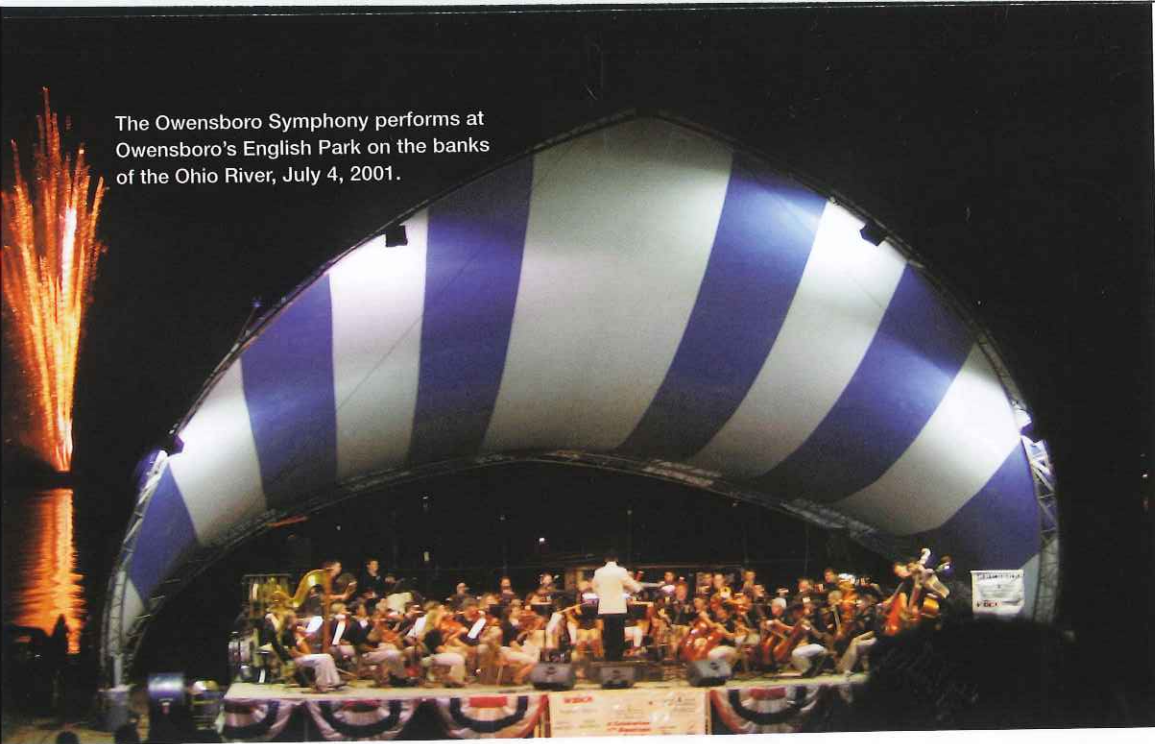
All that changed when RiverPark opened in 1992. The facility, conceived as an anchor for downtown commercial development, featured a 1,400-seat hall designed and built specifically for the orchestra. In an instant, the Owensboro Symphony could boast an advantage not enjoyed by similarly sized regional orchestras, which often perform in theaters designed first as multipurpose spaces.

“We had to totally rethink how the orchestra would play,” recalls Greg Olson, who has spent several decades as a double bassist and who now also serves as the OSO's personnel manager. “It was hard to get your arms around the difference in the complete resonance the hall had, as opposed to a high school auditorium with its back-in-your-face echo. It was like playing with a very poor instrument for a long time, and then suddenly getting a good one.”

Though the orchestra annually gives only a modest number of subscription services in Cannon Hall—the 2010-11 season comprises three classical programs, a Christmastime holiday pops concert, a big-band program plus a semi-staged performance of Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*—it's become a highly sought-after gig. Like most part-time, per-service ensembles, the Owensboro Symphony depends on an eclectic roster of musicians. Many come from the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music, about 100 miles to the north.

“One of the interesting things about this group is that it's very young,” observes Concertmaster J. Patrick Rafferty, 63, whose career includes a stint as Mil-

The Owensboro Symphony performs at Owensboro's English Park on the banks of the Ohio River, July 4, 2001.



Owensboro Symphony Orchestra

degree it benefits from being small and part-time by hewing to what it does best; the OSO is not about to contract for 300 services a year. It remains a decidedly lean outfit. "I've often told the board that it's harder to put together this \$750,000 budget than one for \$450 million," confesses OSO Executive Director Bill Price, who came to the orchestra after retiring as a senior hospital company executive. "We're trying to keep track of every nickel and dime, and make sure we don't spend more than we have."

Price and his fellow staffers are in their second straight year of taking a 10 percent pay cut, in part to offset a decrease in individual giving. "The number of contributors didn't drop," Price says, "but the amount they were giving did."

Throughout good and not so good times, "our board has always been very fiscally sound," Price says. "We have never, as far as I can remember, had a deficit budget. And we've been able to build a reserve of about five months of operating expenses in cash, which is very sound." The OSO finished its last fiscal year \$500 in the black. "We have great support from the community and corporate sponsors," says OSO Board President Waymond Morris, himself mayor of Owensboro from 1994 until 2004. "They

have been pretty steady, and held on."

Morris adds that the OSO's music academy, with multiple rehearsal and meeting spaces, has become a significant source of income. "We allow people to rent the major hall there for weddings, etc," he says. "It helped bring back the downtown area of our city." The academy and the orchestra's administrative offices sit directly across from the RiverPark Center. It is run by Zev Buffman, a high-octane, high-velocity former Broadway impresario who—to the astonishment of more than a

shaved ice in unlikely hues of purple and green, while their parents dined on blankets and at picnic tables, glasses clinking in the night. It was small-d audience democracy, not quite what you'd find during the more formal programs at RiverPark, yet reflecting an honest, unpretentious pride in a homegrown orchestra. The OSO connects to its community as well through its in-house music academy, which provides lessons to area young people, and via the OSO-run Owensboro Youth Orchestra.

Just this season, the OSO appointed youth orchestra conductor Tom Stites as the main orchestra's associate conductor. Stites, who made his OSO debut last season leading the "Imperial March" from *Star Wars* while costumed as Darth Vader, arrived in Owensboro after more than 30 years as a high-school band director in Johnson City, Tennessee. His full-time job is directing arts programs for the Owensboro public school system. Stites says that he has been impressed by the city's commitment to the arts, which is unusual for a town its size. "It's one of those things that, when you're choosing between two or three different options in your life, you can say, 'This is a town that values culture, and this is a place I want to live.'"

Indeed, Owensboro has staked a big chunk of its reputation on that value system. "While the orchestra adds to our quality of life, it's also a great economic development tool," explains Ron Payne, the city's mayor, touting a summer, 2010 survey by *Money Magazine* that listed

Owensboro among the 100 best places to live in the U.S. "We can bring people like potential donors, or executives, to a performing arts center, and tell them we have an orchestra," Payne says. The city is embarking on a \$500 million project to build a new hospital, and is investing \$120 million to construct a new convention center. Owensboro's fairly diverse economy has largely shielded it from the extremes of the financial downturn. "We have weathered this recession pretty well," Payne says. "This is a dynamic little community that's on the move. We have a very low cost of living, we're very safe, and we have great schools."

The city's relative prosperity has directly benefited the OSO. Owensboro and surrounding Daviess County provide a sizable chunk of the orchestra's \$750,000 annual operating budget. "As long as I'm mayor it's very secure," promises Payne, mentioning that the city managed to close out its last fiscal year with a \$1 million surplus. Historically, arts organizations have been a consistent part of our budget," he says, "in the sense that we funded those organizations just like we fund other departments in our city."

The Owensboro Symphony has exerted similar financial discipline. To some



Owensboro Symphony Orchestra

"We've made it our point not to be educators that sound too high and mighty, but we have been accessible, communicative," says Music Director Nicholas Palmer.

few observers—relocated to Owensboro in 2003 to take the RiverPark job.

Buffman lauds the cooperative spirit between RiverPark and the OSO, declaring it “a happy marriage where everybody is accommodating. One of the keys that makes it a lasting relationship—not only landlord and tenant—is that we regularly share every bit of information that we think would benefit each other, or potentially harm each other, so there are no surprises.”

Though Cannon Hall also accommodates touring shows and various kinds of entertainment, it remains dedicated to the art of orchestral performance. Buffman gets evident enjoyment telling how acoustical treatments, the orchestra shell, and so on can be swapped out for an amplification-friendly environment in less than a day. And when the OSO performs there, “it still has some of the best symphony sound that I’ve ever heard,” Buffman says. “Ultimately, the Owensboro Symphony will have to be sustained by its core constituents, the residents who live and work in the city, and who in a very real sense own this ensemble.”

“I think people in Owensboro take great pride in the orchestra,” Palmer says. “To raise the amount of money it took to build a wonderful facility like RiverPark, to have Cannon Hall built as a dedicated symphony hall—that’s not typical. It says that the people in this community really value this orchestra.”

You don’t have to convince Jane Stevenson, an elegant, silver-haired woman who was occupying a lawn chair as the OSO spun out its Broadway tunes that August night. Asked how she regarded the orchestra, she responded in three simple words: “We are blessed.” **S**

ANDREW ADLER is music critic at the *Courier-Journal* in Louisville, Kentucky.

Got an opinion? Join the discussion!

How does your orchestra keep and build on its ties to the community? What do you think are the unique benefits and challenges of performing in a small town?

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ADVERTISER INDEX

Dave Bennett – A Tribute to Benny Goodman	29
Boston University	45
Broadway Pops International	28
Chris Brubeck	2
Capitol Quartet	53
Charlie Chaplin	c2
CHL Artists of Beverly Hills	c4
Classical Kids	21
Franc D'Ambrosio	27
Dukes of Dixieland	33
Five by Design	53
Gami Simonds	33
Just Business!	12
League of American Orchestras	
..... 46-47, 61, c3	
Dan Kamin Comedy Concertos	10

Karkowska Duo Associates	39
Knudsen Productions	16
Ronnie Kole	17, 20
Micocci Productions	25
Price, Rubin, and Partners	5
Monica Robinson Ltd.	26
Robinson Marketing for Orchestras	45
Stanton Management	39
John Such Artist Management	15
Symphonic Pops Consortium	1
Symphony International	31
Peter Throm Management	54
Yoichi Udagawa, conductor	21
Warner Shelter Systems Ltd.	11
Word Pros	32
Yamaha	4



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