

Contras cont. from p.1

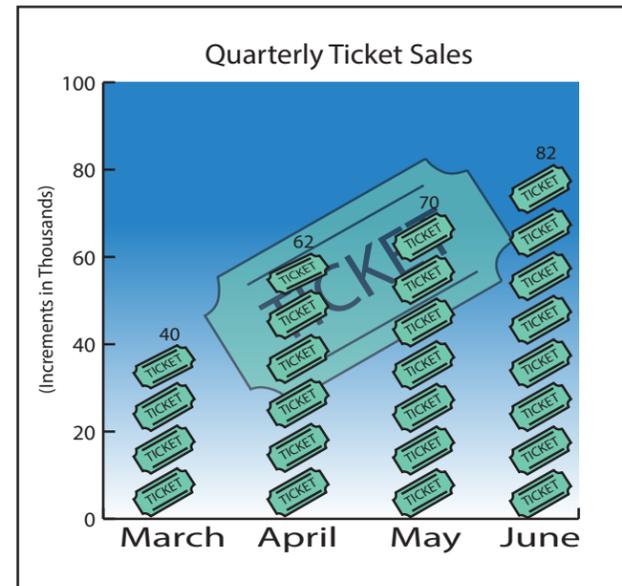
graduate of Oberlin and the University of Cincinnati. He also studied at the Shepherd School of Music with Paul Ellison, former principal bass with The Houston Symphony. Originally a violin player, Mark changed to the bass in junior high because he preferred the sound.

Bill Black and Newell Dixon both have deep roots in the history of The Houston Symphony. Newell, also a native Houstonian and a graduate of the University of Houston, is in his 24th year with the orchestra and fondly remembers the tenure of Sir John Barbirolli. "He had a certain kind of magic," Newell recalled. "It's coming back now with Christoph Eschenbach. What they have in common is something that separates the great from the not-so-great, a certain spark to fire the orchestra up.

Bill Black, a graduate of the Curtis Institute, treasures his experiences playing with Leopold Stokowski. "His overview of the music was big lines," Bill explained, sweeping his arms through the air. "He was an organist, you know, and he played the orchestra as though he were playing an organ, pulling out all the stops."

In addition to the symphony's heavy schedule of rehearsals and performances, these men are involved in a variety of other activities. Newell and Bill work as copyists for composers, writing out the parts for individual instruments or voices. Newell also serves as organist, composer and choir director at All Saints Lutheran Church. In his spare time he operates a ham radio rig. Bill Black is an avid reader and teaches at the University of Houston. He's also in the process of building a home with his two sons.

Mark Shapiro relaxes by playing softball with the symphony team and enjoys high tech computer science. When David Malone is not teaching at Rice University, or playing chamber music for fun, he can usually be found on his bike training for long-distance rides. He also collects stamps and coins. The contra-bass section reflects a diversity of personality and styles of playing, but all four men agree on the high quality of their musical life since Christoph Eschenbach became Music Director of The Houston Symphony.



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The Low Down On Our Colossal Contrabasses



Dominating their side of the stage, the contra-bass section provides the resonant foundation for the string section. There are almost as many sizes and shapes of these instruments as there are names for the largest of the string family. The contra-bass is probably better known as the string bass, or double bass, or more irreverently as a bull fiddle. Some of the symphony contra-basses retain the sloped shoulders of the older viol family; others have the more recent rounded shape. Some have four strings - others five. The members of the section express their individuality by their choice of bow. Some of the players prefer a French bow, which is grasped with the hand on top; others use the German bow,

which is held from the side. Unlike other musicians in the orchestra, they can also choose whether to sit or stand. "I sit on a stool when I play," says Newell Dixon, "because it helps to release the strain of long rehearsals and performances. By the end of a three-and-one-half hour opera, I feel like I've had a good workout. Sitting, my legs support the instrument, thus freeing my arms from actually holding it." On the other hand (or foot?), Mark Shapiro works on his feet with the weight of his instrument supported by the thumb of his left hand. "It's a constant balancing act," he says, "requiring delicate shifts of body weight to keep the instrument under control." Both French and German bows used by the section get treated with the same brand of rosin - the substance used to help the horsehair grasp the strings. "Pop's Bass Rosin" was developed after years of experimentation by the late Len Manno, a former member of the orchestra. In return for acting as quality control experts, each contra-bass player in the section receives as much rosin as he needs from the manufacturer. The leadership of the contra-bass section is shared by Acting Co-Principals David Malone, a native Houstonian, and Mark Shapiro, who hails from New York. David is a graduate of the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts and of the Rice University Shepherd School of Music. Mark Shapiro is a

Cost of the Sound of Music Runs High

When Concertmaster Uri Pianka gives the signal for The Houston Symphony to tune up, the sounds you hear are coming from instruments representing an investment of over \$3 million. To produce the best possible tone, the ninety-five musicians onstage have spent much time and effort to find just the right instrument, often at great financial sacrifice. "The sound of the orchestra as

a whole," according to Principal Cellist Shirley Trepel, "is very dependent upon the quality of all the instruments." The original investment for one fine instrument is only part of the total cost a professional musician faces. One instrument is not enough; there must be a backup in case of emergencies. Trumpet players must have available from eight to ten different instruments to meet the demands of the repertoire played by The Houston Symphony. In addition to the initial investment, there is also the cost of maintenance and repair. Sometimes that means going to another city to find an expert craftsman. Principal Bassoonist Benjamin Kamins personally takes his instrument for repairs to a man in Toronto, Canada, not trusting anyone

else to touch it. If musicians appear to go to great lengths to protect their investment, there is a practical reason for it as well as emotional. While The Houston Symphony carries a \$3.4 million instrument insurance policy, it covers a maximum of \$25,000 for each player's instrument(s). The musicians must pay for any additional coverage. For many string players this can amount to several hundred dollars per year.

Principal Second Violinist Raphael Fliegel



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Profile: Michael (Mike) McMurray



Mike McMurray

POSITION: Member of the contra-bass section and assistant librarian - he's the man who puts the composer's score on the conductor's stand between numbers.

TRAINING: Played with the Youth Orchestra in Lexington, Kentucky, from the fifth grade on and throughout high school. (Played basketball with equal enthusiasm.) Graduated from the Indiana University School of Music with a degree in performance.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER: First job out of school was with the New Orleans Symphony for three years. Became a member of The Houston Symphony in 1979.

FAMILY: Wife Deborah is a homemaker who enjoys painting and teaching begin-

ning piano. Michael and Deborah both enjoy theater and ballet. Sons James, 9, and Doug, 6, are much more interested in Little League baseball and soccer.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT: Deacon at the Lang Road Church of Christ, where he leads singing and teaches a Bible class. Performs informal concerts for children in the Cy-Fair and Katy Independent School Districts.

HOBBIES: When the time allows, sits in with a group which plays country music. Latest hobby: tracing his family genealogy. "My mother's great-great-grandfather played in a regimental band in the Civil

War. I traced my father's family back to Scotch-Irish settlers in Kentucky in the 1800's. It's fun tramping around in the country and discovering cousins I never knew about before."

ASSISTANT LIBRARIAN'S JOB: "Everything from ordering parts from the publisher to putting them on the musicians' stands for each rehearsal and concert. Rented scores require special care - we go over each part to be sure all the notes are clearly visible, and remove notations made by the previous user. Then, each string part has to be marked with bowings." (This aspect of the job may entail marking between 90 and 120 different parts for each concert. Sometimes there may be as many as four or five different markings in one week.) "That's why I go in early to rehearsals and concerts and stay late. It's especially hard on my family.

"I'm very excited about the direction of the orchestra. Eschenbach is very sensitive to the needs of the players, and to me as assistant librarian. That job is challenging. It gives me a chance to work with people, puts me in touch with areas of music I never knew about before. I feel it helps me grow."

Education the Emphasis of Dynamic Eileen Crowley

To Eileen Crowley, The Houston Symphony is not only a source of personal listening pleasure, it is a valuable asset to her efforts as president of the Greater Houston Chamber of Commerce.

The Chamber, a subsidiary of the Greater Houston Partnership, is responsible for ensuring that Houston is a competitive and progressive business location. In order to promote economic development, the Chamber can proudly point to the fact that Houston is one of only four cities in the United States that has four major arts groups: a professional symphony, opera, ballet and theater.

Ms. Crowley emphasizes "having a strong cultural base is an important component of the business climate." The presence of cultural activities and sports are prime attractions for large corporations planning to relocate. The successful work of the Chamber in turn helps provide a broader base of support for the arts groups.

Six years ago, when Eileen Crowley considered a move to Houston from her position as vice-president of the Greater Hartford Chamber of Commerce, the variety of cultural institutions in this city amazed and impressed her. A person with her educational background is not easily impressed. A graduate of the University of Connecticut School of Law, she holds a master's degree in French language and literature from the University of Wisconsin and graduated cum laude from the College of New Rochelle.

A major project under Ms. Crowley's supervision this year has been aimed at improving education, not only in Houston but throughout the entire metropolitan area. "We're making the public aware of the impact of quality education on the community and on the work force," she said. In her opinion, a quality education includes the fine arts, the experience of live performance, listening to great music, and attending ballet, opera and theater. She recalls her own girlhood trips to the Metropolitan Opera in New York and concerts by the New York Philharmonic as being a vital part of her education.

The Houston Symphony's educational programs and the "Sounds Like Fun" concerts give Houston area children a similar opportunity to enhance their education. Making sure that industry is supplied with a work force capable of filling tomorrow's needs is one of the Ms. Crowley's priorities. Ensuring that cultural advantages are part of every child's education is one of the priorities of The Houston Symphony.

The future growth of Houston and The Houston Symphony depends on the type of vision and dynamic leadership that Eileen Crowley brings to the Greater Houston Chamber of Commerce. We are proud to count her among our regular audience.

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says, "It takes a minimum of \$20,000 to buy a suitable violin to launch a professional career, and that's at the low end of the scale." While violins can be acquired for \$5,000 up to \$500,000, Fliegel says some violinists in the orchestra have invested \$35,000 or more in one instrument. At least two are needed, he explained, because the musicians are sometimes required to play under conditions that might damage a fine instrument. Bows represent another considerable expense for string players. Acceptable quality bows range in price from \$1,000 to \$10,000 each, and most musicians have at least two. Uri Pianka has three bows priced from \$5,000 to \$8,000. Some musicians who have been playing professionally for many years are fortunate in having acquired a fine instrument before appreciation increased its value astronomically. Shirley Trepel has two cellos, one reserved for outdoor work. Her prime cello, made by the brothers Lorenzo and Tomasso Carcassi in 1772, was purchased by her father in London for \$1,000 in 1937 and given to her when

she was 13 years old. It is valued today at six figures. No wonder she refuses to trust her cello to the cargo bin of an airliner! She buys two tickets and travels with her cello in the seat beside her. Younger professionals just starting out may not be so fortunate. In most cases acquiring an appropriate instrument means borrowing and paying off the debt over a period of years. Assistant Concertmaster David Halen recently purchased a fine violin. "The monthly payments for the instrument," says David, "equal the typical mortgage payment for three or four bedroom home."

Knowing that the current market has put high quality string instruments almost out of reach for symphony string players, some orchestras, such as the Philadelphia Orchestra, have created interest-free loan funds. The Los Angeles Philharmonic owns a few violins, among them the two once owned by Jascha Heifitz and Jack Benny, that it loans to principal players. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra also has some fine instruments being played by its musicians. The use of fine instruments helps to cre-

ate the rich, warm tone associated with these orchestras. It is hoped that a similar fund and/or loan instruments will be made available for The Houston Symphony musicians in the future.

While string instruments tend to increase in value with time, wind and brass instruments deteriorate and have to be replaced. The musician is faced with constantly rising replacement costs. Ben Kamins bought a new bassoon in 1973 for \$3,900; a used one cost \$12,500 in 1987. Today a new one, a Heckel made in Germany and without doubt the best available, he says, goes for \$20,000. Other wind instruments run from \$2,000 to \$13,000.

Assistant Principal Trumpet Robert Walp, says he prefers trumpets made in East Germany, averaging about \$850 apiece. Trumpet players also need five or six mouthpieces at \$50 each, as well as a collection of 10 different mutes at \$25. Though they do not decrease in value, timpani do not appreciate at the rate of fine string instruments, according to Principal Timpanist Ronald Holdman. While the Symphony owns the four drums he plays onstage, he has a set of his own in Jones Hall to practice on. They cost him \$14,000.

He is able to do his own maintenance. "It's almost like owning an automobile," he says. "I use grease guns and oil cans. Also, I must change the heads about once every two years."

The orchestra's musicians have other expenses connected with maintaining their instruments in top form. Violinists pay a minimum of \$60 for a set of four strings and may change them as often as every three weeks. Contra-bass strings run as high as \$120 for a set. Shirley Trepel spends about \$1,000 annually for regular maintenance on her cello and puts away extra dollars in case of a major repair. When necessary, she flies with it to Albuquerque, NM, to have the work done. Ben Kamins spends about \$500 a year for repairs, and additionally devotes about 20 hours a week making reeds.

Finally there are the carrying cases, engineered to cradle each instrument, protecting delicate parts from jarring in transit. The cost runs high but is a necessary expense to give the instrument the protection it needs to contribute its unique and beautiful sound at the next performance.

December

2 / Sunday	Subscription #7	8 pm
3 / Monday	Sub #7	2:30 pm
4 / Tuesday	Sub #7	8 pm
7 / Friday	A Conoco Christmas	7 pm
9 / Sunday	Subscription #8	8 pm
10 / Monday	Sub #8	2:30 pm
11 / Tuesday	Sub #8	8 pm
15 / Saturday	Christmas Pops	8 pm
16 / Sunday	Practice	8 pm
17 / Monday	Practice	2:30 pm/7:30 pm
17 / Monday	Handel/Messiah	6:30 pm (1st Methodist Church)
18 / Tuesday	Christmas Concert	10:00 pm (Texas Children's Hospital)
18 / Tuesday	Messiah	8 pm
19 / Wednesday	Messiah Sing-Along	8 pm
22 / Saturday	North Area Chamber Concert	8:30 pm
31 / Tuesday	New Year's Eve Gala	8 pm

January

6 / Saturday	Subscription #9	8 pm
7 / Sunday	Sub #9	2:30 pm
8 / Monday	Sub #9	8 pm
10 / Wednesday	Innova	8 pm
12 / Friday	Exxon Pops	8 pm
13 / Saturday	Practice	8 pm
19 / Friday	Der Rosenkavalier/HGO	7 pm
21 / Sunday	Practice	1:30 pm
23 / Tuesday	CCISD Student	10/11:30 am
24 / Wednesday	Der Rosenkavalier/HGO	7 pm
26 / Friday	Rigoletto/HGO	7:30 pm
27 / Saturday	North Area Student	12n/1:30 pm
27 / Saturday	Der Rosenkavalier/HGO	7 pm
28 / Sunday	Rigoletto/HGO	2 pm
30 / Tuesday	CCISD Student	10/11:30 am
	Der Rosenkavalier/HGO	7 pm
31 / Wednesday	Rigoletto/HGO	7:30 pm

