

# ARTSCAPE

# PREVIEW

# JUNE

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**Alumni Weekend: Artscape** celebrates the University of Chicago's creative life with an immersive weekend of interactive arts events, performances, exhibitions, and family programming. Plan your weekend with our preview of public milestone anniversary events and performances by Chicago Men's A Capella, Fire Escape Films, Off-Off Campus, and the University Symphony Orchestra (page 23), and go behind the scenes with an interview with Barbara Schubert, USO conductor of 40 years (below).

## An interview with Barbara Schubert: four decades holding the baton

This year marks Barbara Schubert's 40th anniversary conducting the University Symphony Orchestra. Initially arriving at the University of Chicago as a graduate student, Schubert—now Senior Lecturer in Music, Director of the Performance Program, and Conductor of the University Symphony Orchestra and the New Music Ensemble—ended up taking the reigns of the USO. Not only did she expand the orchestra's size, scope, repertoire, and reputation, but she also developed a robust performance program for the Department of Music. In celebration of Schubert's momentous achievements over four decades, Brook Rosini, Assistant Director of Arts Communications, sat down with Schubert to discuss her career trajectory, her vision for the USO's future, and advice she has for conductors just starting out.



## **As you celebrate your 40th anniversary conducting the University of Chicago Symphony Orchestra, are there particular performances that stand out?**

There are so many, it's hard to choose! For me the most vivid performance is always the most recent. We just performed Strauss' *Till Eulenspiegel*, a marvelously complicated and difficult score. The orchestra did a great job—so that's my richest memory right now.

## **And as you look forward, what is your vision for the USO for the next 40 years?**

I hope the University Symphony continues to thrive and be an important part of campus life: to present adventurous repertoire, provide a meaningful learning experience for students, and offer insight into this great art form—plus a glimpse of the extraordinary beauty and powerful emotion embodied therein—to the musicians and audience.

## **You started out as an instrumentalist. How did you become a conductor?**

I got my first opportunities in college, as a choral conductor. I went to Smith, a women's college, and nobody told me there were no women orchestral conductors! I had no role models, but I had a natural aptitude for conducting and I was encouraged to develop my skills.

When I started going to workshops, I was usually the only woman among 25+ men. That was a bit of a shock, and posed many special challenges. But the situation today is much better. The notion of a woman orchestral conductor is no longer a novelty—although I still get surprised reactions upon occasion.

## **How has the USO changed under your leadership?**

I came to the University of Chicago for graduate study in music history, but quickly realized that my heart was in conducting. At the time, UChicago had an orchestra, a chorus, and a Collegium Musicum, and none was very large or very strong. I started conducting the USO at a pretty young age, and over time I've developed our Performance Program to encompass 18 different ensembles. At this point our Chamber Orchestra is bigger than the Symphony used to be—and there's no question that the USO is a whole lot better than it was 40 years ago!

## **What's unique about a music performance that differentiates it from other art forms?**

In a live performance, with people in the very act of making music, you feel a palpable human energy emanating from the stage. It is extraordinarily exciting! Playing in an orchestra is the ultimate cooperative endeavor, too. Everybody has to be at his absolute best, concentrating at the absolute maximum. We're completely interdependent—and the music proceeds in real time, so we only get one chance!

## **I heard a rumor that a number of people who met in the USO ended up getting married.**

There have been quite a few, actually. The most recent one was when my Concertmaster and Assistant Concertmaster got married. They're a wonderful couple, and both incredibly good violinists. There was a bass player who married a cellist, a violinist who married a trumpet player, a bassoonist and flutist, a few violin pairs, and various other instrumental duos. I have to admit that the players may not always be focused entirely on the music in rehearsals ...

## **What are the greatest challenges you face as a conductor, aside from distracted players?**

I remember one of my first conducting teachers told me, when I was doing a rather mediocre job with Johann Strauss, that what I needed in my life was "a little white wine and frivolity." And it was true. I was ultra-serious at the time, maybe too intense to conduct a Strauss waltz. It is very different from a Mahler symphony, and a conductor has to be versatile enough to bring both to life. There's the never-ending challenge of tapping into what you can find within yourself, then enhancing that by expanding your emotional range, looking to other models, and becoming a broader person overall, with the goal of understanding repertoire doesn't come naturally to you.

## **And what is the biggest payoff?**

The performance—the great culminating moment. Because then it's not only my own contributions from study and rehearsals but also the insights and personality the players offer. I think for everybody in the USO, each performance is a very special event. For many it's at the heart of what they want to do with their lives; for others, it's a wonderful balance to other pursuits, both academic and personal. But all of the players are very excited: they work very hard, and they put their hearts and souls (as well as their technical skill) into it.

## **When you conduct, what do you want for the members of the orchestra?**

As we're rehearsing and performing, I want each of them to enter into every piece of music that we're doing. I want them to have greater understanding and appreciation for the piece by the end of the rehearsal cycle than at the beginning. Actually nothing

thrills me more than when someone who didn't like a piece at first later tells me they love it! I want all of the musicians to become more versatile, as I strive to become more versatile myself.

My hope is that the USO members will develop a lifelong involvement in music, extending beyond their time at Chicago—whether as a performer, listener, and/or supporter. That what they discover in music will continue to bring them great joy, emotional satisfaction, and artistic insight, throughout their lives.

## What do you hope for the audience?

To put it simply, I want to be able to touch every person in a positive way. A concert audience is so diverse. In a few weeks we're going to perform Brahms' *Symphony No. 3*. Now, there may be some people in the audience who have 40 recordings of Brahms' Third and know the piece backward and forward. Yet there may also be others who have only a vague impression of Brahms, and some who have never heard Brahms at all. Each of those listeners will

understand different aspects of the music, and take away different impressions. But I hope each will be moved by the beauty of the music, and the power and conviction of the orchestra's playing.

## Are there big differences in how you feel now from when you started?

Sometimes people ask me if I'm nervous before a performance. Actually, I have more sleepless nights after a performance, when I'm reliving it, thinking of what I didn't do quite as convincingly as I wanted to, and what I could do better next time. A conducting mentor of mine said that with any orchestra, the first 20 years you're learning from them and the second 20 you have something to teach. I think that's very true. Certainly I feel more confident now than years ago, but I also feel that the bar is so much higher. I'm much more aware of how good a performance can be, and so I have to be more focused, and my own conducting has to be far better. Of course I rarely measure up to my own standards. But that's what keeps me going.

## What advice would you offer your students or other conductors just starting out?

In general, a young conductor needs to grab hold of every opportunity and make the most out of it. It's very difficult to get a job conducting, and I've been lucky—but I also embraced every opportunity.

I'll also emphasize that one can achieve meaningful artistic results, no matter what ensemble you're conducting. It's a competitive field, and sometimes there's an assumption to your worth as a conductor is directly related to the size of the orchestra's budget. But that's not true at all. It's possible to have a profound effect on the musical life of a community, and to bring both joy and artistic insight to the musicians and audience, in almost any circumstance.

Finally, be convinced that this is what you truly want to do, and that you can't imagine doing anything else. It takes that single-minded conviction. Remember that the point is to bring music to as many people as possible. That's what will bring you lifelong inspiration and satisfaction.

Excerpted and condensed from an interview with Barbara Schubert on February 8, 2016.

