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A Collaborative Note: Colby Symphony Orchestra is a True- and Unusual- Musical Community

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A Collaborative Note

Colby Symphony Orchestra is a true—and unusual—musical community

By Christina Dong '17

After a final warm-up trill, the room quiets and conductor Stan Renard reaches for the baton. As the musicians watch him intently, he raises his arms, takes a breath, and delivers the opening cue. With that, Colby students and faculty, high schoolers, local amateurs, and seasoned professionals begin to play.

This is the Colby Symphony Orchestra, a community ensemble that draws about half of its players from the greater Waterville community. Their experience varies widely, but they share a common love of music and what players say is an unusual willingness to teach and learn from each other. “Collaboration is what our orchestra is all about,” said bassist Jon Loekle, a lumber mill owner and music instructor who has been in the orchestra for 15 years.

The orchestra was founded in the early 1940s under President J. Seelye Bixler, and it has been a creative home for local and Colby musicians ever since. Players say the mix of backgrounds and ages and, most recently, the leadership of Orchestra Director Stan Renard, have helped maintain the supportive musical setting. “I immediately loved the atmosphere,” said concertmaster Sascha Ziburdaeva, a professional violinist from the Bangor Symphony Orchestra

who joined the Colby symphony three years ago as a ringer recruited to play in final rehearsals and performances.

Ziburdaeva, who trained in Moscow and New York and studied under Itzhak Perlman, was struck by “the energy between instructors and students ... the collaboration between [Renard] and the faculty, the direction between the young and the old,” she said. That spirit of collaboration impressed Renard as well, who, when he became conductor last year, admired the orchestra’s “eagerness to move forward ... to grow as a team.”

The teamwork extends from Renard to the orchestra’s sections, where more-skilled musicians provide guidance and even instruction. French horn player Loren Fields, the band director at Lawrence High School in Fairfield, has been with the orchestra from the time he was a student at Lawrence himself in 1981. Today Fields gives back to the orchestra as principal of his section and through working with Colby students as a French horn instructor.

Over in the woodwinds section, oboist Lucas Lam '17 said, “I’m working with one of the best musical professionals in the New England area,” speaking of his teacher, Michael Albert, who is also his stand partner.

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The younger players get a dose of inspiration as well, as they see adults who have made music a permanent part of their busy lives, Zaburdaeva said. Violinist and Professor of Computer Science Bruce Maxwell once made it to rehearsal after running the Boston Marathon earlier in the day. Associate Professor of Art Scott Reed, who plays French horn, said many of the musicians have other jobs, but “we’re all serious about what we’re attempting to do.”

Principal cellist Steve Witkin, a local ophthalmologist, has been a part of the orchestra since 1988. When he came to Waterville to start his medical practice, he looked for an opportunity to keep up his cello practice as well, and he chose Colby’s orchestra for its talented student musicians and its longtime tradition as a resource for the community. “Each year the composition changes, but the product is always good,” Witkin said.

The musical mentoring does pay off, according to Renard, who consistently highlights student talent by giving solos specifically to student musicians. “From year to year, their skill improves. And for me, that’s a win-win,” he said.

It’s no accident, Colby student musicians say. French horn player Meera Davé ’17 said she has played for different types of conductors over the years, including “strict conductors that

yell if your music falls off your stand or make you so afraid to make a mistake that you’re shaking.” Renard, she said, “is the best orchestra conductor I’ve had. ... He doesn’t scare us into practicing. He encourages us to play to our maximum potential and offers constructive criticism.”

As conductor of the Bangor Youth Symphony, Zaburdaeva said she draws “an amazing amount of inspiration” from Renard and picks up ideas for her own ensemble. “There are so many levels of musicians,” she said. “Every time it’s educational for me.”

And it’s not just the music.

Musicians also connect on a personal level during rehearsal breaks, Zaburdaeva said. “At ‘cookie time,’ you would think that students would only socialize with other students. But every time I would eat a cookie, I would have a conversation with a student. We would share ideas, then talk about life in general. We have amazing conversations.”

Collaboration, camaraderie—and a love of music.

“There’s nothing else that comes close to it,” said Witkin. “It’s a wonderful thing that Colby has ... a great tradition that continues.”