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Los Angeles Lawyers Philharmonic

Lawyers Recess to Play in Symphony

By Karla Scoon Reid

The conductor taps his baton. The musicians gathered at the Wilshire United Methodist Church in Los Angeles ready their instruments. First, they may rehearse Mozart's "Eine kleine Nachtmusik." Then, perhaps the orchestra launches into Terig Tucci's "La Bamba de Veracruz," followed by Leonard Bernstein's "Cool."

During the break, this orchestra's harmonies make way for the melodious BlackBerry buzz and iPhone beep.

"You always know who is in the middle of a deal or deposition because they're on [their cell phone] every moment they're not playing," explains cellist Mei-Lan Stark. "The conductor himself had his cell phone go off in rehearsal. He had his baton in one hand and his cell phone in the other!"

Such is the life of the 75 players in the Los Angeles Lawyers Philharmonic. For this extraordinary ensemble of musicians, it's fighting legal battles by day and conquering Beethoven by night.

"As an attorney, a thousand things run through your brain all at once," says Stark, senior vice president of intellectual property for Fox Entertainment Group. "But for two hours on Monday night, it's just about the music."

This isn't simply a lawyers' orchestra assembled to entertain colleagues. This is a highly respected orchestra whose violinists, bassoon players, and percussionists, happen to work in legal fields. The orchestra's members have grown close, sharing legal advice and forming friendships. The music also serves as a needed respite in these

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L.A. Lawyers Philharmonic, conducted and founded by Attorney Gary S. Green, performed at Walt Disney Concert Hall in downtown Los Angeles on July 15, 2010.



Brett Klein, L.A. Lawyers Philharmonic co-principal trumpet, describes himself as a musician with a good day job.

"Music is an escape from a day filled with dealing with people's problems."

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lawyers' fast-paced lives. And it may not be a coincidence that many attorneys are accomplished musicians as well.

But don't mistake these lawyers for wannabe musicians fumbling their way through Dvorák. Most members have been playing music their entire lives. Some have trained at the Berklee College of Music in Boston or the University of Southern California's Thornton School of Music in Los Angeles. They have accompanied artists ranging from Santana to Kanye West.

"I always thought of the law as my day job," says retired Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Brett C. Klein, 61, the orchestra's co-principal trumpeter. "I'm a musician with a good day job."

Conductor Gary S. Greene founded the orchestra two years ago after being introduced to Klein by the publisher of the *Metropolitan News-Enterprise*, a daily legal newspaper in Los Angeles. During that chance meeting, Klein became Greene's first orchestra recruit and the newspaper's annual Person of the Year dinner became the symphony's first gig.

Greene, 61, runs his own civil litigation practice in Los Angeles. For more than four decades, he has been concertmaster for the Junior Philharmonic Orchestra of California, a young people's orchestra his uncle founded in 1937. While Greene says he toyed with the idea of a lawyers' orchestra in the past, this time he forged ahead seeking lawyers, judges, legal staff, and law students with advanced music backgrounds in a newspaper advertisement and by reaching out to the Los Angeles County Bar Association.

Within a week, Greene, a violinist, received more than 100 e-mails. He quickly assembled 30 musicians who had great legal minds and strong music pedigrees...on paper.

Not long into that first rehearsal at the Wilshire United Methodist Church in January 2009, Greene exhaled: "They *could* play. These aren't just people who happened to play as a youth."

Two weeks later, the L.A. Lawyers Philharmonic held its first performance at the *Metropolitan News-Enterprise's* dinner. With only two rehearsals under their belt, some orchestra members were pinning their hopes on a very successful cocktail hour before they started playing.

Margaret P. Stevens, principal clarinetist, says: "I'll never forget it. After the first piece (at the dinner concert), we all looked at each other and said, 'That was amazing!'"

Since then, the orchestra has played more than 20 concerts, including at the Walt Disney Concert Hall last summer. The orchestra also accompanied singer Paul Anka at the annual California State Bar convention in Monterey last fall. While the orchestra is in the process of securing nonprofit status, the musicians currently play for free.

"It's a really good sound," Greene says proudly. "It's created more excitement than I could have ever imagined."

So much excitement that there's a waiting list to join the orchestra for some instruments. He says he's even turned away musicians who have no legal background.

Greene explains that many of the orchestra's members had the passion for music and the training but no outlet. That's why he believes the orchestra has such dedicated members who make every effort to attend rehearsals.

Stark calls rehearsal nights "a treat" that she fiercely protects on her schedule. Stark, 43, hadn't played the cello for 15 years when she joined the orchestra last spring. Although Stark had played with the Civic Orchestra of New Haven while studying at Yale Law School, her two daughters had never heard her play.

As a subscriber to the Los Angeles Philharmonic's season, Stevens, 44, says it was almost painful to attend concerts knowing that she wasn't playing. Stevens, who practices tort litigation, gave up playing the clarinet professionally to focus on law school 14 years ago.

Still, Stevens says there's a connection between being a trial lawyer and a musician. Trial lawyers, she explains, tend to enjoy performing on some level and have an ability to be creative.

"When you're writing arguments you don't want to say the same thing over and over again," Stevens says, noting that musicians never approach a piece of music the same way.

Stark says that all lawyers, like musicians, must break down "a whole into little pieces." She also believes that playing music and practicing law take the same kind of self-discipline.

For Klein, who has played the trumpet since age four, music is an escape from a day filled with dealing with people's problems. Outside the courtroom, Klein was a member of a variety of community and chamber orchestras before joining the L.A. Lawyers Philharmonic.

But Klein says conversations during rehearsal breaks tend to concern the law more than music. Stevens says there's even some mentoring with younger lawyers gleaned from colleagues, while more experienced lawyers compare notes with the judges in their ranks.

Meanwhile, as the orchestra gains more recognition, Greene has received calls from attorneys in Washington, D.C., and Miami, interested in forming their own groups. As far as Greene knows, the Chicago Bar Association is the only other group of lawyers in the nation with its own orchestra. The CBA Symphony Orchestra, which has 50 members, celebrates its 25th anniversary in June.

Hopefully, Greene says, the L.A. Lawyers Philharmonic is changing people's perceptions of lawyers and judges, proving that they can be in harmony with one another.

Stevens, who also is the treasurer of the Los Angeles County Bar Association, says, when the orchestra received a standing ovation at Walt Disney Concert Hall last July, she spotted fellow judges and lawyers in the audience.

"It felt like a nice moment of solidarity through music," Stevens says. "It felt like it was their orchestra."

Karla Scoon Reid is a freelance writer who wonders if she would have become a lawyer had she just kept playing the French horn.



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