BRAVA, MAESTRA
Barbara Schubert marks 40 years as USO Conductor

Barbara Schubert has learned how to make an entrance. At the beginning of the University Symphony Orchestra’s popular Halloween concerts, the conductor approaches the podium in style: riding a giant shark, stomping in as Baba Yaga, or dressed as Michael Jackson from the “Thriller” video.

But Schubert has proven to have staying power long beyond her entrances, and in honor of her fortieth anniversary as conductor, during Alumni Weekend this year, the USO will premiere an original composition by Ricardo Enrique Lorenz, PhD’99, whose works have been performed by the orchestra in the past, and who himself has guest-conducted the ensemble after studying with Schubert.

Schubert has built the USO and the campus performance program into an institution, shaping it, says Anne Walters Robertson, the Claire Dux Swift Distinguished Service Professor of Music and the Humanities and chair of the music department, in ways “that reflect her combination of a brilliant intellect and consummate musicality.”

MODEST BEGINNINGS

There was no dramatic, choreographed opening when Schubert arrived at UChicago in 1976 as a graduate student who had done some conducting in college and wanted to do more. At the time the USO had 50 or so musicians—some of whom were older than she was—and a sporadic performance schedule. There certainly were no Halloween concerts. But the orchestra needed a full-time conductor, and Schubert learned as she went, gaining, she says, much more experience than she would had she enrolled in one of the few degree programs in conducting offered at the time.

“Vous’d get maybe ten, 20 minutes a week in front of an orchestra,” she says. “Whereas I had three hours, and I had performances, and I had the full responsibility for programming and recruiting and developing and everything.”

“And everything” did mean everything: from selecting music to conducting to making posters—and walking all over Hyde Park to put them up.

“It was just me,” Schubert says. “Literally just me. And one student to help set up chairs and stands.”

But she was invigorated by her time in front of the orchestra and fell in love with conducting.

“Everything you know, everything you do, everything you are, enters into your activity as a conductor,” Schubert says. “It’s captivating, and enormously challenging.”

Today, the USO has 115 members, and the University’s performance program, which Schubert also oversees, has 18 different ensembles, from the USO to a chamber orchestra to a wind ensemble to choral groups. Each year, 750 to 800 people—undergraduates, graduate students, and a few faculty, staff, and alumni—participate in campus music groups.

The orchestra is filled with scientists, writers, future lawyers and policy makers and executives. Schubert understands the fact that very few plan to become professional musicians—and also the fact that all of them are very serious about music.

“My purpose,” she says, “is to foster our students’ lifelong commitment to music. And that’s to performing music, to appreciating music, and to supporting music.”

That includes all kinds of music, from staples like Wagnerian overtures and Stravinsky’s The Rite of Spring to unusual, rarely performed works like Aram Khatchaturian’s Violin Concerto in D Minor. Alexandra Lee Hobaugh, AB’96, AM’97, who played violin with the USO as a College student, thinks of USO participation as a music education in itself, calling Schubert “an archivist and scholar as well as a conductor.”

Some of those unusual pieces, Hobaugh notes, stick with orchestra members long after their playing days. “You say, ‘Oh yeah, I know that piece. I played that piece,’” she says. “It brings a little bit of that musical sunshine, as it were, through the rest of your life.”
CONNECTIONS, MUSICAL AND OTHERWISE

Hobaugh met her husband, trumpeter Michael Hobaugh, SM’94, PhD’97, MD’99, through the orchestra when she was an undergraduate and he was in graduate school. They moved in December to Fort Collins, Colorado, where she is an attorney and he is a pediatrician, but until their move, they lived in Chicago and played with the orchestra when Schubert needed them—UChicago students receive first priority.

As alumni members—just as when they were students—the Hobaughs found that music and the orchestra create “a very important balance” to their personal and professional lives.

“We are all multifaceted, and it’s essential to have what I think of as a diversified portfolio of ambitions,” Alexandra says. “Your asset allocation is going to change throughout your life, but to put all your eggs in one basket belies who we are in totality.”

As an example of that balanced portfolio, Alexandra cites one of her favorite musical moments with the orchestra: listening to a beautiful clarinet solo by an orchestra member who is now an X-ray crystallographer.

Both also agreed that playing in an orchestra provided another benefit.

“When you screw up, nothing bad happens,” Michael says. “Nobody dies. A building doesn’t fall down. A $60 billion deal doesn’t go sideways, and so you learn to handle the stress of challenging situations that might be a little bit out of your control, and perform.”

Long-tenured musicians like the Hobaughs can serve as musical role models, but Michael and Alexandra were professional mentors as well when they were in Chicago. Both advised younger orchestra members about medical school and law school, respectively, and talked about the importance of college and graduate students seeing them struggle to balance work, family, and, yes, music. Michael remembers coming to rehearsals after 36-hour rotations during his medical residency.

“Anything that is worth doing takes dedication in the face of challenges and adversity, and it’s not always fun,” he says.

An ENDURING LEGACY

Schubert says one of the joys of conducting for her is that the work is never finished.

“You’re always striving,” she says, “to understand more about the piece of music. You’re always striving to achieve greater polish. You’re always striving to be more effective, to be more inspiring to your musicians. To get closer to the essence of the art.”

To commemorate Schubert’s legacy of striving, to commemorate a singular experience in their lives, and to ensure that future students can experience the camaraderie and the musical education of the USO, the Hobaughs are leading a fundraising drive to endow the orchestra in honor of Schubert. They are counting on help from fellow members over the years: alumni from the College and graduate schools; lawyers and corporate leaders and scientists; but, at heart, all musicians.

“What joins people is that they are amateurs in the true sense of the word,” Alexandra says. “They’re there because of this great love that they experience and they share.”

If you would like to honor Schubert by contributing to the University Symphony Orchestra endowment, you may make a gift online or send a check made payable to “The University of Chicago Symphony Orchestra” to The University of Chicago, Department of Music, 1010 East 59th Street, Chicago, IL 60637.

Some of Barbara Schubert’s favorites—and lessons learned—in the past 40 years.

MOST MEMORABLE PERFORMANCE, MUSICALLY: There are so many performances that are still vivid in my memory: my first Beethoven’s Symphony No. 9, an early Dvorak No. 7, my first Rite of Spring, Mahler’s No. 2, and Mahler’s No. 5. But truly, the most memorable performance—and, I hope, my best performance—is always my most recent. Conducting is a journey, and I strive to improve with each and every concert.

MOST MEMORABLE PERFORMANCE, OTHER: Well, there was the time the baton flew out of my hand, and the time I forgot to bring my shoes and conducted in my stocking feet—nobody noticed, by the way. Then there was the time I skipped an entire piece in a Holiday Pops concert and started to introduce the subsequent piece, causing the players to scramble for their music.

FAVORITE COMPOSER TO CONDUCT: I’d have to say Mahler. And Richard Strauss. And Stravinsky. And Dvorak. And whatever I’m conducting.

FAVORITE COMPOSER TO LISTEN TO, IF DIFFERENT: Honestly, I relish listening to anything and everything!

FAVORITE HALLOWEEN COSTUME, YOURS: The one I wore for “Dangerous Women” in 2006. It was a hot pink evening gown with bright pink feather trim, made for somebody like Michelle Pfeiffer or Halle Berry, but I had fun wearing it anyway.

FAVORITE HALLOWEEN COSTUME, OTHER ORCHESTRA MEMBER(S): The USO musicians are wonderfully creative! They’ve come dressed as bottles of catsup, hot dogs, Big Bird (in multiples), frogs, the Firebird, a postage stamp, and of course all sorts of pirates, goblins, politicians, harem girls, wizards, and the like. Each year it’s a fabulous show.

PIECE OF MUSIC YOU HAVE NOT YET DONE W/ USO BUT ALWAYS WANTED TO: Bartok’s Miraculous Mandarin, Strauss’s Der Rosenkavalier.

ADVICE TO ASPIRING CONDUCTORS: Hold onto your convictions, and always put the music first—ahead of yourself and ahead of your career. And remember: the baton makes no sound.

FAVORITE ACTIVITIES BEside Conducting: Hiking, especially in Acadia National Park or in Colorado, and sailing, although I don’t do the latter often enough.