

# Backstage

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## Lansing's New Music Man An Interview with Timothy Muffitt



Photograph by J.D. Small Studios

*In a previous issue of Backstage, Lansing Symphony Music Director Timothy Muffitt answered some questions about his new role with the orchestra and shared some ideas about music-making. In the interview that follows, he talks with Director of Communications Cindy Hunter Morgan about his ideal place, his middle name, his debut with the Lansing Lugnuts...and how music can keep us excited about the world.*

**The LSO's MasterWorks concert on November 10, "Summon the Spirits," will feature the famously psychedelic *Symphonie Fantastique* by Berlioz. Will you wear tie-dye?**

Well, no. I probably won't wear tie-dye for that.

**Thinking of Berlioz, he describes his vision of Euphonia, the imagined musical Utopia, in *Evenings with the Orchestra*. Of course, Euphonia is really**

**an undesirable, unattainable spoof. What is your ideal city? What is your utopia?**

My utopia would be the wilderness. I love everything the city has to offer, but the wilderness is really where everything comes together for me. A lot of Romantic composers were very connected to this concept and many of them used nature as a muse. Mahler even said, "I've written the Alps into my symphonies many times."

**Among conductors, do you have a sense of musical kinship with anyone in particular?**

There are certainly conductors that I admire a great deal. James Levine is one, Carlos Kleiber is another, as is Simon Rattle. What I sense from them is a very deep conviction to get to the composer's intentions – more so than their own. They are just so deeply committed to finding the way the composer wanted the piece to speak, and that is a priority for me as well. Interestingly, if you were to listen to one work conducted by those three conductors, each performance would sound different. But they have the ability to make the music come alive and I sense a great sincerity in their music-making.

**When you are studying a new score, do you ever feel the conductor's equivalent of writer's block? Do your interpretive powers get clogged?**

Sometimes...if composers are new to me or if their language is new to me. For example, I am very familiar with Copland. But over the course of his career, he wrote in many different musical styles, some of which speak to me more readily than others. Sometimes it takes a while to make the connection between what is happening in the music and what the emotional content is. When I find myself in that position, I make myself write an emotional flow chart. I sit down and describe the flow of musical content in non musical words. That really helps me. In the music of Brahms or Rachmaninoff, there is no question what the work is trying to evoke. But in some of the composers of the 20th or the 21st century...it's a new language. Conductors have to learn to speak it so we can help the audience feel it too.

**Poet William Matthews wrote a poem, "A Night at the Opera," in which he suggests that art is not about beauty, but about passion and accuracy. Is that**

**true when you are conducting? Does beauty come after or out of passion and accuracy?**

Well I don't know if I'd prioritize in that order. However, without accuracy there certainly would not be beauty! You would just end up with chaos and noise. So, accuracy is an important fundamental to making music speak, but part of music is about beauty. And beauty in music shows up in many different ways—sometimes in ways that one would not consider traditional beauty. I would certainly say that beauty and passion are very closely linked to successful musical performances.

**Art keeps us excited about the world. Classical music, in particular, can be an intense, visceral experience when we hear it live as it is being created (or re-created). Knowing this, how can you use your role as Music Director of the Lansing Symphony to serve as mid-Michigan's musical laureate?**

Well I think a lot of it has to do with advocacy. The number one thing is to facilitate extraordinary performances on the stage. But secondarily, it is to remind people to keep the arts as an important part in their life...whether it's going to a symphony concert or reading a book of poetry or seeing a BoarsHead Theatre production. We're all in this together and we need to share these experiences! People are very busy today. Our lives are complex and there are many entertainment options for our non-working time. Just as it is a dietician's job to remind people to eat their fruits and vegetables, just as it is a dentist's job to remind you to floss, it is my job to remind people to nurture their spiritual sides and keep themselves artistically engaged.

**You are Timothy Wellington Muffitt. Is there a story behind the Wellington part, or is it just a very cool name?**

It's a family name. A great-grandfather of mine was named Wellington Post. Now there's a great name! Unfortunately, there is no connection to the famous Post cereal name. My middle name is Wellington, my father's middle name was Wellington, and my son's middle name is Post.

**You made your minor league debut in September when you threw out the first pitch at a Lugnuts game. I noticed you are right-handed. A southpaw has some advantages in baseball, but a conductor needs both hands all the time. Does that make you an extraordinarily coordinated breed?**

Some of my colleagues do some interesting things to try to become closer to ambidextrous. If they are right-handed, they'll open doors with their left hand. They just try to engage the "other" hand in activities that would normally fall naturally to the dominate hand. I'm certainly not super coordinated. I suppose there are some benefits, but I have not really seen them cross over into daily life. And the thing is, once you get some basic skills under your belt and you realize that the primary thing a conductor does is to develop a personal understanding of the music, it seems as though technique becomes second nature. I'm trying to communicate the character, atmosphere and quality of the music, and I have two hands with which to do that. The hands kind of take on a life of their own. It all grows out of music.

**As a boy, you lived in Hillsdale for a time. One final question to establish what sort of Midwestern roots you have retained: Soda or Pop?**

Well, when we lived in Maine they called it "tonic." But I spent enough time in the Midwest that I drink Pop.

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Donor  
SPOTLIGHT

# Chuck Hillary



Chuck and Nadean Hillary

By Cindy Hunter Morgan

A little over 25 years ago, Chuck Hillary accepted a job as Vice President of Development at Ingham Medical Center. His boss there, Ed McRee, served on the Lansing Symphony

Board along with two other people Hillary admired: Ken Beachler and Craig Ruff. Hillary knew they were men who would not waste their time, so their involvement in the Symphony meant something to him. A few years later, when Hillary was asked to serve on the Board, he agreed because of those people. As it happens, Hillary's motivation for joining the LSO Board fits neatly with his philosophy about fundraising.

"One of the big things in fundraising is who is associated with it," Hillary says. "If you admire the people who are asking you for money, you are more likely to share it."

Over the years, Hillary has become something of an expert on the subject. He trained with Roger Lyons, who owned a respected fundraising company based in

Colorado. In 1995, Hillary bought the company and it became "Hillary Lyons Associates," based in Dimondale. Hillary sold the company last March, but he remains involved as Senior Vice President. The firm works with health care institutions throughout the country to help increase community and philanthropic support. With 26 clients (hospitals) in 12 different states, Hillary travels frequently. When he is doing business in other cities, he often attends local symphony performances. In recent years, he has heard the orchestras of Spokane, Abilene, Indianapolis, and St. Louis. He'll be in Abilene again in November and plans on meeting with some of the staff members of the Abilene Symphony to share ideas.

A member of the Lansing Symphony's Executive Committee, Hillary is Second Vice President of Development and Chair of the Maestro Society. As such, he has some solid opinions about local philanthropy.

"People should give to the Symphony because the orchestra is part of the fabric of the community," Hillary says. "Everyone should be helping their community somehow. You get satisfaction out of giving,

but giving is something you learn – it's not automatic."

Hillary has spent his career helping people to discover the joy of giving, and his commitment to the health care industry and to the Lansing Symphony is an interesting pairing of altruistic involvement. A hospital can help save a life, but an orchestra can help give life meaning and joy. Each has an intrinsic role in a vibrant community and a strong influence on a city's reputation

Building connections between individuals and non-profit organizations is what Hillary has spent the last 25 years thinking about, but occasionally he needs to suspend his focus on business relations, community relations, and planned giving strategies. On these occasions, the Lansing Symphony Orchestra can give back to one of its most generous givers. When Hillary attended the orchestra's season-opening concert on September 9, he experienced the relief and satisfaction that Symphony audiences have felt for centuries. "It was fantastic!" Hillary says. "I bolted out of my chair! At the end of a concert like that, your daily concerns are just gone."

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Musician  
SPOTLIGHT

# Richard Sherman



Principal Flute Richard Sherman

By Cindy Hunter Morgan

Those familiar with Lansing Symphony Principal Flute Richard Sherman might know that he is also the Artistic Director of the Lansing Symphony Chamber Series, professor of flute at the Michigan State University School of Music, and principal flute of the Chautauqua Symphony Orchestra. If you know, too, that he is from upstate New York, you might have formed a panoramic portrait of his early years in the Adirondacks. It would be easy to imagine a small red-headed boy marching somewhere along Lake Champlain with a penny whistle, but the truth is less auspicious – and arguably more relevant.

When Richard Sherman was an 11-year-old in Plattsburgh, New York, he took a tone differential test. Along with all of the other students assembled in the gymnasium, eager to qualify for a shiny new instrument, he was asked to listen to two pitches and indicate which one was lower and which one was higher. He failed the test.

Pairing that story up with the larger history of Sherman's obvious talent and musical success is entertaining, but in the end the whole tale is a powerful argument for the importance of music education in our nation's schools. Sherman flunked the test, but he still found a place in the school band program and, like the road that diverged in Frost's poem...it made all the difference.

"I wanted so badly to play something," Sherman says. "The kid next door played the flute, the kid on the other side played the trumpet, and my neighbor across the street played the clarinet. I kept waiting for my instrument to come."

One by one, the neighborhood kids quit, and Sherman found the opportunity, and the nerve, to ask for his chance to play. "One day, my buddy took me to the Band Director and said, 'My friend wants to play,'" Sherman recalls. "The Band Director, Mr. McDougal, looked at me and said, 'Come back at the end of the day.' If he had said no my life would be different."

Sherman was just the sort of young person who needed and appreciated the introduction and access to music his public school provided. Although his Dad had a stack of records in the house, including some recordings of the Boston Pops, his parents were not musicians. Among his siblings, Sherman is the only one who plays an instrument. "I found my niche," is how he describes it. "Playing music has always been my own refuge. My parents never had to tell me to practice."

As it turned out, that band director, Mr. McDougal, was a talented but frustrated teacher who was notorious for losing his temper. He did, however, recognize Sherman's talent, and he did his best to nurture it. Years later, when Sherman was in college, Mr. McDougal composed a work and sent the score to Sherman, along with a note that said, "Thank you for a lifetime's compensation for teaching." It may have been an unusual expression of appreciation, but it was poignant and meaningful, and it resonated with Sherman.

In 8th grade, Sherman started taking private lessons with Donald Macdonald, a farmer who lived near Lake Placid. "He was a rugged guy with a ruddy complexion," Sherman says. "His fingernails were gnarled up from baling hay, and he left his flute on the mantel above the fireplace. When he picked up that flute, he turned into a poetic figure. Lessons with him were always peaceful and gentle. He was soft spoken, and economical in speech. He was my mentor, and he had the strongest impact on my sound."

For the past several years, Sherman has worked with another musician who also farms: Lansing Symphony Music Director Timothy Muffitt. Muffitt has

a farm in New York, near Chautauqua, where he serves as Music Director of the Institution's Music School Festival Orchestra during the summer. As principal flute of the Chautauqua Symphony Orchestra, Sherman had an opportunity to work with Muffitt before Muffitt's appointment in Lansing. "Our relationship has grown and grown," Sherman says. "I respect him a great deal. He has talent, energy and dedication, and he's the same man off the podium that he is when he's on it. He's a straight-shooter, he's honest, and he's hard not to respect."

When he is on stage with Timothy Muffitt, Sherman is a long way from Mr. McDougal's middle school band room. Yet that room in Plattsburgh is where Sherman's path to music began, and for that we are all in debt to Mr. McDougal. Music compensates each of us for our own private endeavors and frustrations. Mr. McDougal was not alone in that.

## More on Richard Sherman

**Children:** Three kids, ages 9, 12 & 16.

**Why He Chose the Flute:** "I was a really little guy. The flute was so portable. It was sleek."

**Number of Flutes He Owns:** Two. "I'm thinking of selling one of them. It seems extravagant to have two. But flutes are not like violins...the flute I play would cost about \$14,000."

**Education:** Studied at the Royal College of Music in London, received a bachelor's degree in music from the Eastman School of Music, earned his master's degree in music from Northwestern University.

**Former Position:** Was Principal Flute with the Rochester Philharmonic in New York for nine years.

**How the Audience Affects Him:** "I'm aware that you never know who is out there. You always have to play to your highest standard. As Rachmaninoff said, 'A good performance is dependent on an appreciative audience.'"

**What has surprised him:** How happy he is here in Lansing and at the University. "Years ago, I didn't see myself as an academic, but MSU has been wonderful. They've given me so much freedom to discover what it means to be a professor and to figure out what I want it to mean. This is the place that fits me, this is where the Lansing Symphony Orchestra is, and this is where I want to be."

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## News & Updates

The annual meeting of the Lansing Symphony Association was held in June. The Association elected several new members and reelected other members to the Board. New members elected to serve three-year terms were **David Akerly**, news anchor at WLNS Channel 6; builder/developer **Daniel L. Eyde**; and retired executive and former Symphony Board member **William Paxton**.



LSO Music Director Timothy Muffitt threw out the first pitch at a Lansing Lugnuts game on September 1, 2006. Before the game, a group of LSO musicians, Board members, and staff met at the Nuthouse. Pictured, left to right, are James McGillicuddy, member of the Board of Directors; Stan Starnes, President-Elect; and Bill MacLeod, President.



Music Director **Timothy Muffitt** will be welcomed by members of the Lansing Re-

gional Chamber at an executive welcome breakfast in November at the Radisson Hotel.

answered questions. The group will meet regularly.

ries. Fedewa performed on the Koussevitzky "Amati" Bass, which was built by the master Italian violin maker in 1611. The instrument was on loan to Fedewa from the Guarneri House Violin Shop in Grand Rapids. LSO bassist **Melissa Straus** accompanied him in the performance.

LSO Principal Bassist **Ed Fedewa** performed a free noon-time concert at Dart Auditorium in September. The concert was part of Lansing Community College's new Random Acts of Music se-



The Lansing Symphony held a pre-season party, "Prelude," at Eagle Eye in September. Pictured above are Jack Cawood (on the left) and Dave Brogan. Music Director Timothy Muffitt attended the event, which featured hors d'oeuvres, drinks, and a selection of music performed by LSO Violinist Lauren Hansen. Hansen also serves on the staff of the LSO as Donor Relations Associate and Box Office Manager.

The Lansing Symphony expanded its marketing with the installment of the organization's first billboard, which went up in August near Frandor. Many thanks to **Adams Outdoor Advertising**, Symphony President **Bill MacLeod**, **BriarWood Realty**, and photographer **J.D. Small** for making this possible.

Several past Presidents of the Lansing Symphony met in September for lunch at Walnut Hills. Music Director **Timothy Muffitt** attended the meeting and shared his ideas and an-

**Backstage**

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**Timothy Muffitt**, Music Director & Conductor  
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