

Musician SPOTLIGHT Richard Illman

By Cindy Hunter Morgan

If you comb through Rich Illman's front yard this spring, you'll probably find some Kentucky Bluegrass mixed in with the ryegrass and fescue that fill out most Michigan lawns. Some would call it probability, citing the general abundance of the species. But Rich Illman has more claim to Bluegrass than most, so he might call it history. Illman spent 30 years in Kentucky -- enough time to know something about Kentucky Bluegrass, and college basketball, bourbon, and horse racing.

Though he never served as a bugler for the Kentucky Derby, Illman has played the "Call to Post" plenty of times and participated in a full circuit of Kentucky horse racing traditions, including the annual horse sales in Lexington, which mean big business in Kentucky. An average sale at Keeneland is one million dollars, and any purchase is a gamble. People are betting on pedigrees, and it's more fun to do that when the transaction is part of a party. Illman played at many of those gatherings but still marvels at the atmosphere of excess surrounding them.

"People spend thousands and thousands of dollars on these galas," Illman said. "They're set up like a circus. You can ride on elephants, or in helicopters or hot air balloons. It's all free for guests." Or musicians who happen to have a gig at the event. Illman performed at many horse farm functions and enjoyed the festivities. He also shared the stage with stars such as Burt Bacharach and Ray Charles.

In the end, he was not lured into the world of racing, though he does have a Derby party most every year. Nor was he tempted by the glamour of pop stars. Instead, he held faculty jobs at Eastern Kentucky University and the University of Kentucky, played in the Lexington Brass Quintet, and was principal trumpet for the Lexington Philharmonic Orchestra. In 1990, he applied for a faculty position at Michigan State University. He now serves as associate professor of trumpet and a member of the faculty quintet "Beaumont Brass" at the MSU College of Music. He started subbing with the Lansing Symphony Orchestra soon after arriving here and later won the principal trumpet job.



LSO Principal Trumpet Rich Illman

Over the years, Illman has acquired nearly 10 instruments. Three of them are always with him at a concert: his B-flat trumpet, his C trumpet, and his piccolo trumpet. Some are brass with a lacquer finish, and some are silver plated. Illman does not think the finish makes much of a difference, but he allows that some believe otherwise and he was interested enough in the possibility that he worked with a physicist at the University of Kentucky to study the sounds of various instruments.

The physicist/friend had access to an acoustic lab. Illman played and was taped on a reel-to-reel recorder, and later he and his friend analyzed the harmonic content and the responses of the instruments. They determined that a variety of things can and do affect the sound of a trumpet. Sometimes, it is the trumpet itself, and sometimes it is the weather. But Illman and his colleague discovered that one factor has more influence than any other: a player's ability to play in the "center of the pitch."

More About Rich Illman

Hobbies: Cooking. He and a friend donated "Dinner for Eight" to last year's Big Band Ball auction. He likes making French meals and Italian meals, especially veal scaloppini with lemon sauce. He also enjoys home projects and recently converted his garage into a great room with a loft and a spiral staircase. And he likes tennis, fishing, and travel.

What is more than just a hobby: Yoga. He has been practicing yoga since 1986 and created a book and a CD with his partner, Jo Martinie, titled "Yoga for Trumpet Players."

His early years with the trumpet: He started playing when he was boy in Warrensburg, Illinois. The band director was a trumpet player, and Illman received private lessons with him. "I got a really good start. Some people don't and they spend the rest of their careers fighting bad technique." In 7th grade, his family moved to Lexington. "That was real culture shock, but it helped to have a band to join." Illman was invited to play in the high school band when he was in 7th grade. They even made a special uniform for him because he was so small.

Additional history: Illman played with the Brass Band of Battle Creek in Royal Albert Hall for the National Brass Band Festival. The Brass Band of Battle Creek was the first non-British band to perform at the festival.

Favorite works: Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5, Mussorgsky/Ravel's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, Hindemith's *Symphonic Metamorphosis*

Illman started out as a physics major and later switched to music. That physics background helped him in the acoustic lab, where he formed a better understanding of the science of trumpet playing. That understanding has helped him as a player and as a teacher. Illman has 22 students and it can be assumed that all of them benefit from his time in the lab at the University of Kentucky.

Of course, others benefit as well. Those who have heard Illman play with the Lansing Symphony know that LSO ticket holders are profiting from the former Wildcat's quest for tone. And Illman will admit the whole orchestra sounds good.

"The Orchestra just keeps getting better," Illman said. "And Timothy Muffitt is going to take us even further. The Orchestra is united, and we are all impressed with Muffitt's musicality and professionalism. Come out and here us!"