

TIME OUT

MSOC director seeks to expand group's audience

By Michael J. Dunne

For the Journal Inquirer

MANCHESTER — Lewis J. Buckley, recently retired after a 35-year career with the United States Coast Guard Band (29 years as its director), is the newly appointed orchestra conductor of the Manchester Symphony Orchestra and Chorale (MSOC). Along with his work as a conductor at MSOC and elsewhere, he continues to compose, arrange, and publish prolifically, creating solo and ensemble works for various concert media.

Buckley also remains an active trumpet soloist, frequently combining solo appearances with conducting, often in premiere performances of his own commissioned works. We sat down over lunch recently to discuss his first concert, on Saturday, Oct. 30, as director of the MSO, as well as his thoughts about music and performing in general.

Q. The Manchester Symphony Orchestra and Chorale (MSOC) enjoys the reputation of being an "audience-friendly" ensemble. What do you see as things that the MSOC might do to keep that reputation, as well as produce programs that larger audiences would like to see?

A. Obviously, this is a major challenge for orchestras all across the United States. Orchestras are falling on hard economic times because audiences are shrinking, and there's a lot of concern about that. The MSOC's mission is to provide an opportunity for its members to play classical music at a high level, and to provide community service through that. I think the organization has done a good job of meeting that mission. In regard to the desire to build audience, I think the challenge is to break down the barriers that many people place between themselves and classical music, mostly because they've never been exposed to it. The way I'd like to address that is to become active in the Manchester area, for instance as a speaker at local service clubs and other community groups, and say, "Look what you've got here; it's really good. Just come in the door one night; bring the family and come to a concert." I'd combine that approach to the community with actually speaking a little bit at the concerts themselves. Sometimes I think we musicians do a disservice to ourselves because we act as if it's a kind of snooty thing to be part of. We should be telling the world that classical music today is as good as it was 200 years ago, when it was the daily entertainment of huge segments of the population.

An example of another kind of community outreach is that our trumpet soloist for the upcoming concert, James Ackley, is doing a clinic for music students in the Manchester schools prior to the concert. He's an eminent classical trumpet player, and he's doing this because it's a way to contribute to his town of residence, and also because it gives the students an introduction to the University of Connecticut Music Department, where he is an assistant professor of music for trumpet.

Q. How do you see the MSOC increasing its involvement with the students of the music department of the Manchester school system?

A. One thing is what we're already doing; getting our soloists involved with the schools by giving music clinics to the students. As I've said, James Ackley, our trumpet soloist, will be doing that this month, as did our guest cellist, Darrett Adkins, last season. I personally hope to be doing some of those kinds of things, too, in preparation for our Feb. 12 concert. That event will feature our local music students becoming an actual part of the orchestra,



Manchester Symphony Orchestra and Chorale director Lewis J. Buckley

both rehearsing and performing. I'm planning to be working with many of those students in special clinics, preparing for their participation in the concert. We're hoping to get youngsters from all instrumental groups to perform with their adult counterparts in the orchestra in our "Side By Side" concert.

Q. This season the MSOC has two "on the road" concerts. On Dec. 18, the MSOC accompanies the Connecticut Concert Ballet's performance of "The Nutcracker," and on April 17, the MSOC will present a concert in Suffield. Is this idea of "going on tour" something new for the MSOC?

A. "The Nutcracker" isn't really a 'road' performance since it'll be at Manchester High School, but it is a collaboration with another artistic group.

Being 'on the road,' as we will be in Suffield, isn't really new; in the past it wasn't uncommon for the MSOC to perform away from its home base, but it hasn't been done much in recent years. It's a really good thing to do; it's a way for the ensemble to serve a wider community, and from the performers' point of view it gives them the chance to play the concert that they've been diligently rehearsing more than once. It's very hard to prepare a concert and then do it just one time!

Q. This is your second year with the MSOC, first as assistant conductor and then as artistic director. What do you see as the strengths of the MSOC?

A. That's an easy question to answer. The members of the MSOC are smart people and good musicians. They're dedicated, they love what they're doing, and they have a wonderful time doing it. That enthusiasm and love for the music comes across in everything they do.

Q. Your background is that of an accomplished musician whose career has primarily been in the military. There are those who tend not to think of "military" and "great music" as fitting together. Can you talk a bit about how the two concepts work together, and how they came together in your life?

A. In my own life, I've had opportunities

to conduct and perform a huge variety of music in a lot of different situations. I've conducted the Hartford Symphony Orchestra for 15 years in its annual "Toys for Tots" program. I led the Eastern Connecticut Symphony twice in its summer series some years ago. I've had the opportunity to conduct performers on the level of Plácido Domingo and Roberta Peters. My training was at Eastman School of Music, where the curriculum at the time was entirely classical. The strength I bring to the MSOC is that I have a wide background in jazz and commercial music, as well as classical music, so there aren't very many situations I'm uncomfortable in. Along with the Coast Guard Band,

I've worked with choruses, orchestras, and wind ensembles often in my career. I'm really enjoying finally having the opportunity to conduct the orchestral literature that I'd already conducted in settings for wind ensembles, such as light classics and overtures, in their original full-orchestra settings! The Coast Guard Band, like all the premier service bands, does a wide variety of music at a very high level. They're professional musicians who also play in other orchestras and musical groups, and are much more than a "marching band."

Q. Thinking of "classical" music of the 18th and 19th centuries, are there military roots to a lot of that music?

A. Well, let's use John Philip Sousa as an example. Although his nickname in American history is "The March King," he was much, much more than that. Many of the European masterworks of his era — his professional career spanned the years 1872 to 1932 — were given their first American performances in transcriptions for his band. In other words, people in our country first heard some of the great works by Wagner and other classical composers played by the Sousa band before they ever heard them played by a classical orchestra. He was also a prolific composer, and even wrote a successful operetta. So there's always been that interaction between the civilian and the military side. Although he became famous as director of the United States Marine Band and also worked with the U.S. Navy, for most of his career he had a civilian band of his own. From his time on, there's always been a correspondence between military musicians and the music world as a whole.

Q. You've recently retired as director of the U.S. Coast Guard Band, an ensemble of very talented, professional musicians. What in your experience are some of the differences between directing an organization like that, and working with an amateur community group of performers such as the Manchester Symphony Orchestra?

A. Actually, there's more commonality than difference. The bottom line for both is trying to get that combination of technical competence and musical expressiveness that will move an audience. Professional people who audition for their jobs bring a

level of competence and experience that is, of course, different from that of volunteers. Both groups share a love for what they do, but volunteers bring a passion for the music that is very close to the surface. The way the conductor deals with the music itself is very similar in the two situations; the way he or she works with the people is what's different. I really, really enjoy working with volunteers, people who are there for no other reason than they want to be there, doing what they're doing. That's not to say professionals don't want to be there, but any professional will tell you it's a different atmosphere. Not better, not worse, just different.

Q. You like jazz, and you play it frequently. What kind of jazz do you most enjoy, traditional (sometimes called 'Dixieland' jazz) or more modern?

A. My first love has always been Dixieland jazz, which I've been playing since elementary school. Performing has always been a huge part of my life. I play regularly in a brass quintet with my wife, who plays the French horn. As I'm looking forward to having more time for performing, I've even gone back to taking a few trumpet lessons to improve my technique. Also, my continuing to perform keeps me in touch with what the performers in the orchestras I conduct go through to produce their music, which I think makes me a better conductor.

Q. The repertoire that you've chosen for the upcoming concert contains a number of pieces ranging over a period of about a hundred years. What went into the choice of the four selections?

A. There's no theme for this particular concert, although there is an overall theme running through the selection of repertoire for the MSOC's year. During the last season I surveyed the performing members of the MSOC, and most of the orchestra members felt they wanted to remain close to a classical repertoire. A survey we did of our audience last season reinforced that opinion. I incorporated that preference but then included enough variety that the concerts would be appealing to audiences of a wide variety of interests.

The trumpet solo in this upcoming concert, "Concerto for Trumpet" by Josef Haydn, is perhaps the most widely-known of all the trumpet concerti. It fits very well with having James Ackley, the new professor of trumpet at UConn, available to perform it.

The concerto is one of the earliest written (in 1796) for what was then the newly invented keyed trumpet. Prior to that time trumpets had no valves or keys and were capable of playing only a limited number of notes.

The new instrument had keys like a clarinet and could play the entire chromatic scale (including all the sharps and flats). Although the keyed trumpet was popular only briefly before it was supplanted by the three-valve trumpet we know today, it was during the keyed trumpet's heyday that this piece was written. I've always had an interest in Haydn's trumpet concerto, and have played it myself a number of times.

Certainly Dvorak's "New World Symphony" is one of the most popular and often-performed classical works there is: "The Berlioz (The Roman Carnival Overture)" is, again, an immensely popular overture. "The Saint-Saens (Danse Macabre)" was chosen simply because the concert is on the night before Halloween!

The Manchester Symphony Orchestra's first concert will take place at 7:30 p.m. on Saturday, Oct. 30, at Manchester Community College. For more information, call (860) 528-0906 or (860) 871-9111 or visit the Web site: www.msoc.org