

Testing the waters

Shepherd University is hoping to have a permanent professional orchestra with the premiere of Two Rivers Chamber Orchestra Saturday evening.

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Article Photos



Mark McCoy, standing, chair of Shepherd University's department of music and conductor of Two Rivers Chamber Orchestra, goes over a piece with Scott Beard, associate professor of music and coordinator of Keyboard Studies at Shepherd. Beard will be the featured soloist during Saturday night's premiere of Two Rivers Chamber Orchestra at Shepherd University. (Journal photo by Crystal Schelle)

Fact Box

The water itself is almost symbolic of a finely tuned orchestra —flowing and ebbing as one. The rivers also represent the carving of a pathway just like Mozart and Beethoven's influences have done for music today.

Two Rivers Chamber Orchestra will pay tribute to those musical influences during its premiere at 8 p.m. Saturday in the Frank Arts Center Theater at Shepherd University.

Mark McCoy, chair of the Shepherd University Department of Music and conductor of the orchestra, says the professional orchestra had been an idea for some time. The community had supported an orchestra several years ago, but it wasn't associated with the university.

Members of Friends of Music of Shepherd University, a nonprofit, had expressed supporting such an endeavor—to bring the music back to Shepherdstown. “The goal was to provide a professional orchestra in the Eastern Panhandle,” he says in his office a week before the concert.

After collecting musicians—many from Shepherd’s own faculty as well as outside of the area— the result is Two Rivers Chamber Orchestra.

McCoy says when people think of orchestras they usually think of one that has 50 to 60 members. That is larger than Two Rivers Chamber Orchestra, which includes winds, brass, percussion and strings. “A chamber orchestra is a smaller orchestra about 40-ish people or smaller,” he says, “it usually plays literature from the early period.”

Saturday’s concert will consist of the classics, “Mozart Piano Concerto in A,” “Beethoven’s Symphony No. 1,” Rossini’s “Barber of Seville Overture” and a lesser known piece, John Rutter’s “Five Meditations for Orchestra.”

“I wanted music that was familiar, but I also wanted to play something new or unusual,” he says.

He says he wanted to make sure to include the Rutter piece in the first concert because it was “the most beautiful piece I had ever heard.”

Scott Beard, associate professor of music and coordinator of Keyboard Studies at Shepherd, will be the feature soloist on piano for the Mozart Piano Concerto.

Beard says he is happy to perform “Mozart Concerto in A Minor No. 23 KV488.” He says the piece is “so elegant and so very, very lyrical.”

In the second movement the piece is unusual because it is in the key of F sharp minor. “It’s incredible with a beautiful expression that is almost heartbreaking,” he says.

As a solo pianist, Beard says it is often about being alone on stage. But, he says, being part of a orchestra is wonderful “when everybody plays together; it’s really teamwork.”

Beard, who celebrates his 10th year as a member of Shepherd’s faculty, says he’s excited to have a professional orchestra. He says it gives his students a chance to come out and watch him perform.

Two Rivers Chamber Orchestra, he says, also gives people a chance to experience live music. “The idea is not to listen to it on CD or watch it on YouTube, but watch a live performance,” he says. “It’s a great performance.”

After presstime Tuesday marked the first time that Two Rivers Chamber Orchestra members gathered for the first of its weeklong rehearsals. Many are traveling from Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia as well as West Virginia for the rehearsals.

McCoy says the rehearsal the week of the concert a typical schedule of a professional orchestra.

In his office, days before he gathered all of the musicians in one room, he says many couldn’t wait. “The team is really excited about the concert,” he says.

Stephen Czarkowski of Gaithersburg, Md., is principal cellist for Two Rivers. He has been with Shepherd University for five years, conducting the youth orchestra and is a member of the cello faculty. Additionally, he teaches at Montgomery College in Maryland.

Czarkowski says when he McCoy approached him about becoming a member of the orchestra he was excited at the prospect. “It was wonderful because there is a lack of a professional orchestra in the Panhandle,” he says.

He says he has invited his students to come to not only the performance, but also the rehearsals. “It’s a great opportunity for my students to see me as a professional musician,” he says. “They also get to

see professional musicians working.”

The rehearsing experience, he says, will show his students “the real world” when it comes to working as a professional musician. For a musician, he says, he enjoys the rehearsing process because “it’s the first time we can hear everyone together.”

Czarkowski says he is happy that Beethoven’s “Symphony No. 1” is included because it is the composer’s first work. He is also happy that McCoy included the lesser-known Rutter in the program as well. “New music is essential,” he says.

He says he has a feeling Shepherdstown is ready to embrace a new professional orchestra. “I’m just excited,” he says. “The buzz and talk around town is that people are excited to have an orchestra.”

Heather Austin-Stone of Shepherdstown is first chair violin and concertmaster for Two Rivers Chamber Orchestra. She is also adjunct professor of violin and viola at Shepherd University, including helping with preparatory classes.

Austin-Stone says she bets out of all the musicians who are part of Two Rivers, she has the shortest commute. “I only live a mile from Shepherd,” she says with a laugh.

With 25 years of playing experience on violin, Austin-Stone also performs with other local orchestras. She says she is excited for what Two Rivers can grow into as a professional orchestra.

She is also happy with this concert’s musical selections. She says she enjoys Beethoven’s “Symphony No. 1” because it holds memories for her. “It’s a ‘real piece’ that I did in my young career as musician,” she says.

Oftentimes for younger students pieces are arranged to simplify more complex work, she says. But she had the chance to play the actual piece. “This is the real thing,” she says.

Austin-Stone says she has been gathering the troops to come see her in the concert. “I’ve invited everyone I can think of to come and see the performance,” she says.

McCoy says he hopes with Two Rivers’ inaugural performance this weekend is one of many to come. Thanks to the success of Orchestra Founders fundraising drive, there are already plans for two concerts planned for next season — one in the fall, the other in spring.

To encourage the next generation of classical musical lovers, Friends of Music have also offered free tickets to students in not only the Eastern Panhandle, but Maryland and Virginia, with parents half price. (Students should contact their schools).

McCoy credits the Friends of Music for knowing that encouraging music in young people is more important than paying seats. “They believe so strongly that students should hear music and to hear it live,” he says.

Austin-Stone says she wants the audience to enjoy the performance. “I just hope they sit there and think that these are local musicians ... ,” she says, “and realize how exciting it is and have a wonderful experience.”

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