

Bassoon on Ice

Jim Swift's professional biographies all mention his position with the La Jolla Symphony: second bassoon. The specificity of "second" reflects an insistence on precision. Jim has built his career on accurate and meticulously documented physical measurements of the ocean.

But bassoon came first, before he even knew that being an oceanographer was possible. Jim started out on the clarinet and learned to play well enough to earn a spot in the all-city band. When he saw just how many other children were vying for a chance to play in the first clarinet section, he decided to try another instrument. Bass clarinet looked interesting, but none were available. Instead, a few weeks later, he went home with a bassoon.

"That was even better," Jim says, "because nobody else played the bassoon. You get to play in everything!"

Or almost. As a college sophomore Jim auditioned for the University Circle Symphony Orchestra, which draws players from the Cleveland Institute of Music. They were slated to play Rite of Spring, but Jim heard about the audition at the last minute. Without time to prepare well, he didn't get a seat. "They were nice about it," he says, but Rite would have to wait.



You can't get any farther north than this. Jim Swift plays Bach at the North Pole

In this issue

Stephanie Weaver shares her thoughts on the first few months as our executive director.

Byron Chow, violist and violinist with the symphony, invites us to several performances on his primary instrument, piano.

Winners of our young soloists competition will perform in recital.

Jim studied physics at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland where the path to the ocean leads through the Great Lakes. Jim's path to the ocean led through card games with friends. Their chats about an ocean unit in an engineering class intrigued Jim who asked his advisor if people did physics in the ocean.

A few more contacts and a graduate program led to a long career as a physical oceanographer, but also a hiatus in playing the bassoon. While in graduate school, with his wife Sue pregnant with their first child, Jim put the bassoon away. It stayed in its case for 16 years.

Ocean expeditions take Jim far from home for months at a time. His particular interest has always been the Arctic. When he first started out, his work was in the sea north of Iceland and he remembers a paper with a large question mark for the Arctic Ocean. Ice-covered and forbidding, little was known of the polar seas decades ago. Much has changed.

"The big difference is the ice in the Arctic Ocean. If somebody had told me forty years ago what kind of changes we were going to see, I'd almost not have believed it — that things could change so much, so fast," he says.

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Jim has sailed through Bering Strait to the North Pole three times, a journey that wasn't possible when his career began. Although submarines have prowled beneath the ice for a long time, the first surface ship to reach the North Pole was a nuclear-powered Soviet icebreaker in 1977. As the ocean warmed and ice thinned, more ships have plowed through.

"In 2015 we went with a single, not-super-heavy icebreaker over a very remote area of the Arctic Ocean called the Alpha Ridge that was completely impenetrable at the start of my career," Jim says.

Life on the ships has changed as well. Expeditions used to cut Jim off from communication with home. He remembers a birthday telegram Sue sent him one year that cost a fortune and arrived late. One of Sue's more recent messages, sent by email, was a simple imperative to "sit up straighter." Although Jim was in the Indian Ocean, almost directly through the planet from San Diego, Sue could see him hunched over his computer via webcam.

Things changed at home as well. Jim and Sue's two daughters grew up. And Jim took up the bassoon again. After a year of lessons, he joined the La Jolla Symphony and has been playing the second bassoon part ever since. And he finally got a chance to play Rite of Spring, twice.

Months at sea remained a feature of Jim's life, but to maintain his embouchure, he started taking along a bassoon—first bassoonist Tom Schubert's spare instrument in fact, lent for the journeys. Jim manages to find times and places aboard the ships to practice without disturbing his shipmates, and his polar excursions have led to unusual musical opportunities. A brief, chilly recital of (part of!) a Bach suite for cello on the ice at the North Pole allows Jim the claim

of northernmost bassoonist. The only direction he could go from there was south.

All the way to Antarctica, as it turns out, though not to the South Pole, which will remain forever unreachable by ship as it sits in the middle of a continent. Instead, Jim played at the hut used by Robert Falcon Scott's first Antarctic expedition, which still stands near McMurdo Station on the coast.

Jim spent most of his career on the faculty of Scripps Institution of Oceanography, very much tied into climate science. "I was a measurement-oriented oceanographer, and it turned out that what I was doing became reference measurements of the ocean."

Jim and his colleagues measured dissolved gases and chemicals that serve as tracers for how atmospheric gases circulate in the oceans, temperature, and salinity from the surface of the seas to the sediments. The global survey takes about a decade for a tag-team of ships and scientists to complete. Then they start all over again. The work has built up a trove of information.

"They're completely unhindered, public data. I have some pride in that," he says. They're also meticulously documented. "People a hundred years from now will not only be able to read the numbers, but also understand how we got those numbers."

Although Jim formally retired a year and a half ago, he still goes to work every day. As emeritus faculty, he can work on the projects that mean the most to him, keep his office, and (suppress your envy) park for free.

—Susan Brown



Update from our Executive Director

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

As I am just completing my fifth month in the position of Executive Director for the La Jolla Symphony & Chorus, I am still constantly impressed by the unique and special dynamic that flourishes here. It's been a whirlwind. Both our November and December concerts were stunning. There were so many amazing moments, but among my favorites were hearing the orchestra conquer the mighty Bartok Concerto for Orchestra and then shortly after that, take on Harmonium. Not to mention this year's stunning Nee commission piece by Celeste Oram. This past weekend, I was delighted to hear the incredible talent of some of San Diego's finest talent in the LJSC's 60th Young Artist Competition. The judges had quite a task to choose winners from such an incredible pool of talent.

During my career, as I have traveled around the USA and Canada, I have never encountered a Community/Campus orchestra that performs such difficult repertoire at such a high level. Not only that, but the performances are filled with élan and energy that is truly inspiring! At a time when many orchestras are asking themselves difficult questions about the future, we seem to be finding the answers. The profile of the modern artist is beautifully exemplified by our musicians in both ensembles.

We are mid-way through our season, but at this point I want to thank all of you for welcoming me so openly to this position, and for sharing the passion and energy that have made this organization what it is today. Every day, I still find myself asking "How did I get do lucky as to live and work in San Diego?", but more importantly, "How did I get so lucky as to work with this inspiring organization?"

Warm regards,

Stephanie Weaver

Support the Symphony and Chorus!

Buy a raffle ticket for a European river cruise. At press time, only 8 remained! Details and link to purchase the ticket on our web site.

Celebrate the winners of this year's young soloist competition! They perform at a private residence in La Jolla Sunday, February 23 at 2:00 pm. Details and link to purchase tickets on our web site.

www.lajollasympphony.com

Edit this newsletter! It's fun! Talk with fellow musicians, write, layout each issue, maybe even print & deliver it. Spread the joy by forming a committee? Punctuate with abandon because who's gonna stop you?!!! Let me know if you're willing to take over: susandbrown@gmail.com.



Byron Chow, who has played both viola and violin with the symphony, has four upcoming performances on his primary instrument: piano.

In March, Byron plays Edward Macdowell's first piano concerto with the North Coast Symphony, led by our principal violist, Daniel Swem.

"I have always enjoyed bringing neglected works of less-known composers to light," Chow says, and notes that he especially likes the concerto's "enchanting, songful second movement."

And as a founding member of the Orvieto Trio, Byron will join musical friends for an annual winter concert series at local libraries. Their performances will include his transcription of Fauré's Pavane, excerpts from Rachel Grime's Music for Egon Schiele, and Mendelssohn's second piano trio

North Coast Symphony
Saturday, March 7, 2:30 pm
San Dieguito United Methodist Church
www.northcoastsymphony.com

Orvieto Trio
Sunday, February 23, 2:30 pm,
Scripps Miramar Ranch Library

Wednesday, February 26, noon,
Encinitas Library

Wednesday, February 26, 6:15 pm,
Rancho Bernardo Library
www.orvietopianotrio.com