

New symphony director believes music makes life better for everyone

By RACHEL COLEMAN

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He spends his days teaching Liberal's younger set to sing at Garfield and McKinley Elementary schools. But on Tuesday nights, Mark Compaan dives back into the world of orchestral music, where he's spent most of his career in music education.

"I'm really enjoying being able to put together music of the masters and other types of music," said the new director of the Southwest Symphony Society Orchestra. "I'm looking forward to exploring what the group can do."



Compaan picked up the baton after former director Grant Mathews, who had directed the symphony for more than five years, stepped down this year. Symphony board chair Kay

Burtzloff said that it was difficult to find a new director to fill the vacancy.

“We’ve been so happy with Grant over the years,” she said, adding that the public school band teacher had devoted a generous amount of time to the group. “We’re sorry to see him go, but he needs a life, too. And we are really pleased to find someone of Mark’s caliber to step in.”

Compaan brings broad experience to the task of directing Liberal’s community orchestra. A graduate of Oral Roberts University and Pittsburg State University, Compaan also studied at Western Montana College prior to starting his teaching career in that state. Compaan taught band in Victoria, Kan., for eight years before he moved overseas to teach at various international schools. For seven years, he taught instrumental music at private Christian schools in South Korea, Turkey and Thailand, directing ensembles of various sizes and even an orchestra that accompanied a musical production.

But all the resume facts don’t convey Compaan’s love of music, and his belief that everyone benefits when musicians perform.

“There’s no better way for people to express emotions, than through music,” Compaan said. “Music gives voice to feelings, whether sad or joyful or uncertain. It can be an outlet. It can lift our spirits.” That’s true, he pointed out, whether a person is playing or listening.

Burtzloff agrees.

“I wish I had musical talent, but I don’t,” she said. “So, I appreciate the fact that we have very talented performers here in Liberal. We need to give them a place to perform and bring a distinct type of music to the community.”

At Southwest Symphony, Compaan directs a diverse group of players from Liberal and the area. In terms of age, they range from 14 years old to those well past retirement. Most come from Liberal, but a few drive into practice from Sublette and other area towns.

“I think it’s fun to bring people from different age groups together,” Compaan said, noting that it’s also a refreshing change for him. Having spent his days among kindergarten to third-grade students, he relishes the opportunity to direct musicians of varying ages and skill levels.

“The common thing is the music,” he said. “There, everyone comes together.”

So far this semester, Southwest Symphony has met twice for weekly rehearsals, set at 6:30 p.m. Tuesdays in the Seward County Community College music room. Compaan said the group has varied slightly each time, and he’s still getting a feel for the mix of musicians.

“We’re just kind of in the beginning stages, seeing who’s going to be involved. The first week, I think I gave out music that was too easy. Last week, maybe some of the pieces were too hard,” he said. “What we end up with will be driven by the composition of the group.”

Compaan said he hopes younger musicians, as well as ones who might describe themselves as a bit rusty, will consider joining.

“I’d really like to grow the program,” he said. “I know people are busy, and they have varied lives. If they are willing to take time to join us, and try it out, I’d love that.”

Though the symphony has traditionally attempted to include a liberal sampling of stringed instruments, Compaan isn’t too worried about ending up with a perfectly balanced group.

“The most important thing is that we have people who want to play music,” he said. It’s going to be a challenge to recruit people, especially when you think of how many people there are who know how to play an instrument but haven’t been playing for a while, maybe even years. None of us are perfect musicians, but that isn’t the point. We’ll find music that everyone can enjoy.”

Southwest Symphony Orchestra plans to stage three concerts during the upcoming academic year, though the dates have not yet been determined.

For information about joining the symphony, contact Compaan at 913-839-7161 or via email at mark.compaan@usd480.net.