

HARFORD MAGAZINE

Conductor Sheldon Bair and his community ensemble keep the music playing in Harford

By **Mike Klingaman**

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Sheldon Bair founder and conductor of the Susquehanna Symphony orchestra for over 40 years at his home in Bel Air. (Lloyd Fox/Baltimore Sun)

The vanity plate on Sheldon Bair's bright red Camaro gives one pause. "MICE TRO," the plate reads. It's confusing, Bair concedes.

“People think I’m either a conductor or an exterminator,” he said. Music wins: Bair conducts the Susquehanna Symphony Orchestra. (The tag MAESTRO was unavailable when his wife gifted him the plate).



Sheldon Bair founder and conductor of the Susquehanna Symphony orchestra for over 40 years. (Lloyd Fox/Baltimore Sun)

For 46 years Bair has led the SSO, a Harford County ensemble composed of 70 accomplished musicians from 18 to 80, many of whom offset the stress of their regular jobs by tooting their own horns. Some attend evening rehearsals straight from work, like the police officer who arrived wearing her body armor. It’s an eclectic bunch including doctors, nurses, teachers and stay-at-home moms. The timpanist is a former engineer; a violinist, a retired psychiatrist. All take their cues from Bair, 67, who founded the orchestra fresh out of college in 1976.

Since then, the SSO has performed hundreds of concerts, at venues from Bel Air High to New York’s Carnegie Hall and St. Patrick’s Cathedral. Its maestro has tackled everything from Beethoven to a symphony based on music by the Grateful Dead.

“For that concert, we all wore tie-dyed shirts,” said Bel Air’s Dawn Zipay, who plays French horn.

Routinely, Bair trots out soloists, sometimes offbeat. One played the saw; another, the glasses. And while the orchestra plays golden oldies like “Rhapsody In Blue”, “Scheherazade” and Haydn’s greatest hits, it also performs modern works by less-known artists and even by Bair, who has written 27 compositions himself. A Civil War buff, he penned a piece for strings, reflective of that era, which the SSO played as a narrator delivered the Gettysburg Address.

Come the holidays, they perform “The Nutcracker Suite,” sometimes in a jazz style adapted by Duke Ellington.

It’s a hardy crew that Bair has assembled. In 2007, en route to a performance at St. Patrick’s Cathedral, two of the orchestra’s three buses crashed on the New Jersey Turnpike. Five musicians were hospitalized (none were seriously injured) and a cello was destroyed. But the concert went on before a standing-room-only crowd of 4,000. The two cellists shared one instrument, switching off between numbers.

Two years later, the orchestra played Carnegie Hall, a venue dear to the heart of Zipay, a native New Yorker.

“To walk through those halls of greatness, in the footsteps of so many amazing musicians, is something I’ll never forget,” she said. “It was like stepping on the baseball field at old Yankee Stadium.”

In 2014, during a concert and choir performance of Carmina Burana, by Carl Orff, two female choristers fainted and fell into several orchestra members. They were helped offstage. Seeing that, the conductor didn’t miss a beat.

“The tuba player gave me a thumbs-up, and I went on,” Bair said.

Even COVID-19 didn’t stop the music. The orchestra — or a scaled-down version of it — played 19 concerts, many of them outdoors, during the pandemic. Current plans call for a full performance at Bel Air High sometime in October.



Sheldon Bair founder and conductor of the Susquehanna Symphony orchestra with his wife, Barbara who is also a member of the orchestra, at their home in Bel Air. Barbara showing a couple of the many accolades awarded to her husband. (Lloyd Fox/Baltimore Sun)

Bair's charges swear by their maestro who, they say, grasps the concept of a community ensemble.

“Sheldon has realistic expectations of what our orchestra can do, but he knows how to push us to our limits,” said Zipay, 47, a longtime music teacher in the county’s public schools. “He prefers to give us a challenge.”

And when the notes go wrong?

“I’ve never seen him lose his temper [in 14 years], though I’ve seen him look stern,” Zipay said. “He’ll flat out tell us we need to practice, but in a way that doesn’t demean you. He’s mindful that we have lives and families outside of the orchestra, and he’s very respectful of that.”

There are lighthearted moments as well. Once, while rehearsing a difficult piece, Bair stopped the music on a sour note — the cue for members of the horn section to flash the cards they'd prepared beforehand.

“We all held up signs that read, ‘We’re sorry, we’re not worthy,’ “ Zipay said.

A two-time breast cancer survivor, Zipay weathered those ordeals by playing on.

“Music was my escape; it met my mental needs,” she said. “The support Sheldon and his wife gave me during those times was incredible.”

Bair’s wife, Barbara, plays oboe in the SSO, where the two met and later wed. Through the years, at least four other couples have followed suit.

Born and raised in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Bair embraced music at an early age.

“My first memory was as a percussionist in sixth grade,” he said. “At the end of one piece, I was supposed to pull the pin on an alarm clock. But when I went to pull it, I missed.”

Bair played drums and string bass in high school and formed a garage band, banging out tunes by the Beatles and Jefferson Airplane. While attending Elizabethtown College, he made pin money performing with a trio in the cocktail lounge of the Hotel Hershey.

“We played ‘Tie A Yellow Ribbon Round The Old Oak Tree’ more times than I care to remember,” he said. As a senior, to test his music mettle, the college asked him to conduct a performance of “Fiddler on the Roof.”

“I had to assemble a pit orchestra in three weeks,” he said. “That experience lit my fire.”

At 22, he moved to Bel Air, began a 40-year run teaching orchestra in county schools and founded the SSO. Through it all, he has ascribed to the same basic tenet.

“Teaching music is not about teaching people to become professional performers,” Bair said. “It’s about teaching the love of music.”

Clearly, he has found his niche, SSO colleagues say.

“We’ve had guest conductors and they just don’t compare to Sheldon,” said



Founder and musical director Sheldon Bair conducts the Susquehanna Symphony in a free performance during the Bel Air Summer Concert Series at the Bel Air High School auditorium. (Phil Grout / Baltimore Sun Media Group)

Allan Andreycak, 70, a timpanist from Bel Air. “He gets involved emotionally, mentally and physically with the music. He has pushed the envelope on the community orchestra pretty far, but he’s not so serious that it’s not fun.”

To celebrate musicians’ birthdays, at rehearsals, the orchestra breaks into “Happy Birthday” — with a twist.

“You’re allowed to play the song in any key, as loud as you want, while adding whatever you want to the piece,” said Zipay. “It sounds like something played by members of a fourth-grade band on their first day of getting their instruments.”

During the annual Christmas concert, the audience eagerly awaits the final number, Leroy Anderson’s “Sleigh Ride.”

“We all wear Santa hats, and violinists string lights on their bows,” said Andreycak, an orchestra member from the start. “We do have fun here.”

Has Bair changed much through the years?

“Well, he’s bald,” said Doris Reinhardt, 79, a longtime flutist from Fallston. “Sheldon has gained a tremendous knowledge of orchestral literature. He knows what music is out there, and he has networking connections to get the pieces that he wants us to play.”

After 46 years, Bair has no plans to pass the baton.

“I’d like to make it to 50,” he said, adding that his goals have been met.

“I have friends who are professional conductors,” he said. “I never wanted that; I’d be scared out of my comfort zone and might make a fool of myself. On the other hand, professional conductors might have a hard time dealing with a community orchestra. I’m happy working with amateurs because there’s always a teaching moment. I encourage peoples’ talent to come out to the best of their ability.



Sheldon Bair is music director and founder of the Susquehanna Symphony Orchestra. (Photo courtesy of Stefan Antwarg)

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