

SIUC's *Maestro*

*Edward Benyas conducts and plays—and is music director
for the Southern Illinois Symphony Orchestra and the
Southern Illinois Music Festival.*

by Marilyn Davis



Family has played an important role in Edward Benyas's career. As a schoolboy, he chose to play the oboe because his mother urged him to—she loved its sound. And just a few years ago, he founded the summer Southern Illinois Music Festival partly because he had missed the birth of his daughter by three hours due to a longstanding professional engagement with the Des Moines Metro Opera. “I decided to focus my summer activities here,” he says, “and not have to travel away from my family seven weeks a year. And I’m artistic director [of the festival], so it’s more rewarding for me.”

Although Benyas teaches oboe at SIUC and likes playing chamber music in particular, directing SIUC’s orchestra program has become his primary work. He heads the Southern Illinois Symphony Orchestra, made up of faculty, students, area professionals, community members, and guest professionals for specific performances. He particularly cites the support with the orchestra that he’s received from his string-teaching colleagues: Michael Barta, Meng-chun Chi, Eric Lenz, and Philip Brown. He also works with the Chicago Chamber Orchestra, a professional group in its 58th season whose founder and conductor has appointed him music director designate, meaning that he will be next to take over as conductor.

Benyas enjoys playing the oboe with his colleagues and with other groups. “Most instrumentalists really enjoy playing

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chamber music more than in a large ensemble because it gives them the best means of expressing themselves,” he says.



Benyas turns toward pianist Emanuel Ax during a performance. *Photos by Bob Benyas.*

“It allows them to work with and make music with friends.”

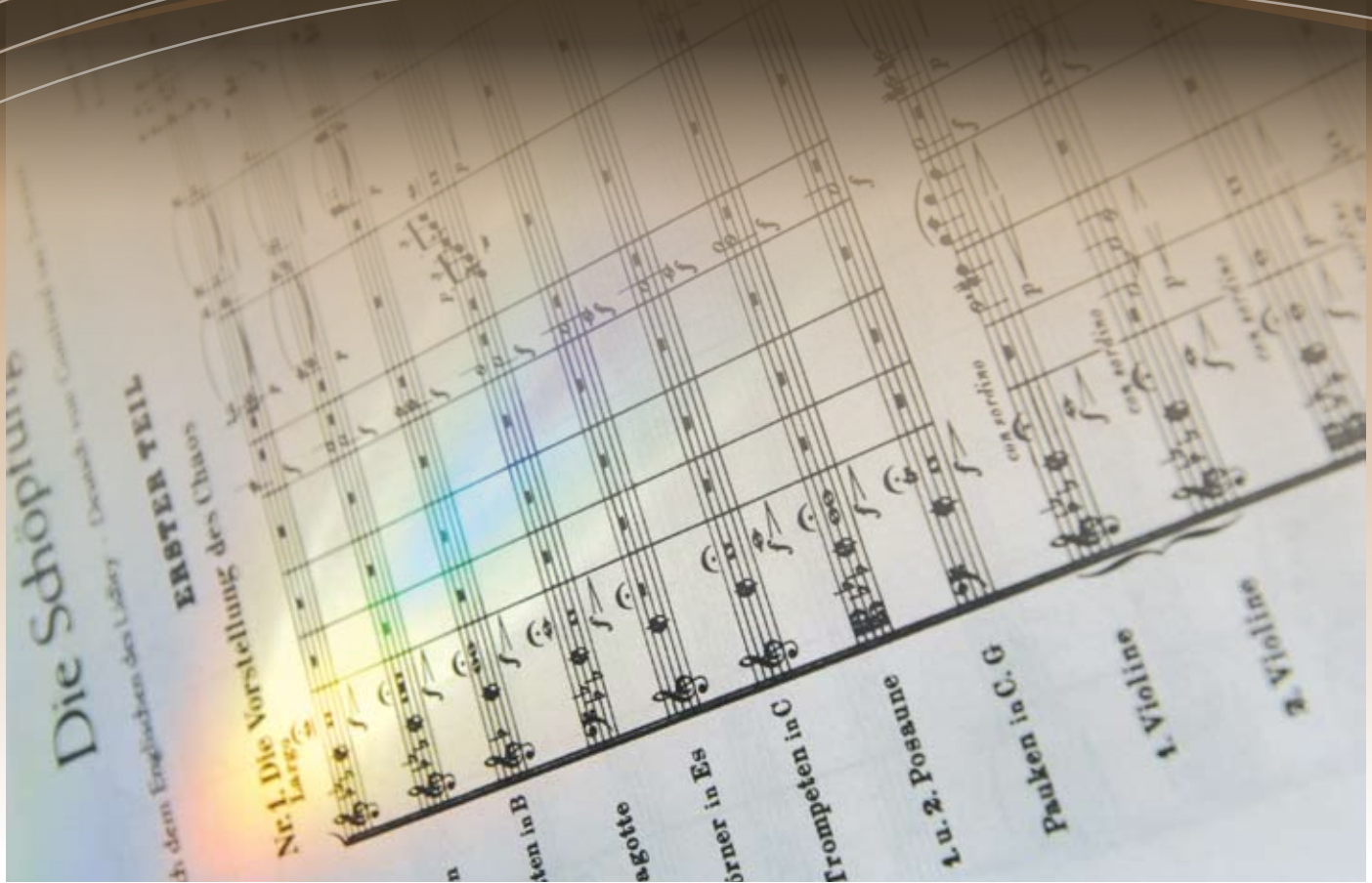
“But I’ve had plenty of orchestral experience too,” he adds. That includes performances with the Chicago Symphony, the Lyric Opera of Chicago, and “dozens” of regional orchestras all across the nation. “My experience playing with large

it’s important that you be a specialist in something. Any conductor has to be some kind of instrumentalist or vocalist [as well], generally an instrumentalist.

“As a professional you develop certain standards that you have to live up to, in order to play a solo, to play in a chamber setting, to play in an orchestra setting. Those standards—in terms of tone quality, intonation, musicianship—all those things come into play when you’re standing in front of an ensemble [as a conductor].”

Being a music director of an orchestra involves more than just learning a piece and rehearsing the ensemble. You must choose a repertoire suitable for your orchestra and your audience. You have to study what you’ve chosen (“You can always glean something else from the music,” Benyas says.) You have to have a

ensembles is crucial to my ability to run the orchestra program here,” he says. “To have any credibility in front of an ensemble,



thorough knowledge of the period, style, and conventions of the type of music you're playing. In short, Benyas says, "You have to have a vision of the music you're trying to get across to the public, and you have to convey that to the ensemble."

Benyas notes that the instrumentalists have the same responsibility to research the period and have a solid understanding of the music—not just practicing it, but listening to recordings of it. "My job is to synthesize all of that as it comes together," he says. "We work on intonation (getting all members of the group at the center of the pitch), phrasing, dynamics (changes in volume and emphasis). And we must rehearse efficiently. You have to find the parts that need work, and balance that with playing through the whole thing.

"That also comes from developing skill as an instrumentalist. One thing I tell my students is that you can't just keep playing from start to finish and assume the rough spots will work themselves out. You have to isolate parts you're having difficulty with."

When choosing a program or series of programs, Benyas likes to mix it up with a balance of genres, from baroque music to contemporary music. His favorite music to conduct, however, is 19th-century French and Italian opera.

The music he finds "most challenging and rewarding" to conduct is Romantic and modern music—Romantic because its variations in tempo and other qualities leave "a lot of room for interpretation";

modern because it's the music he's least comfortable with. "I'm not the greatest exponent of modern music," he says, "but I think it's important to play the music of our contemporaries and recent contemporaries."

With the help of graduate and undergraduate students, Benyas oversees everything having to do with the Southern

Illinois Symphony Orchestra and the Southern Illinois Music Festival—from auditions to fundraising and publicity. The orchestra, because it involves University and community people, professionals and nonprofessionals, "constitutes teaching, creative activity, and service—all three of the areas I'm involved in. It has more of an educational component than the festival," Benyas says. The latter is an all-professional ensemble funded in part by the Illinois Arts Council's ArtsTour program. (The orchestra also receives funds from the Illinois Arts Council,

and both receive support from SIUC and donations from community supporters.)

The festival ensemble comprises players from the Chicago Chamber Orchestra, along with local professionals

and top student musicians, who find themselves working with some well-known instrumentalists and vocalists from across the country. The event is a three-week marathon: each musician may take part in two dozen performances, with about three rehearsals for each. (“We’re cutting back this year, from 51 events to

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36,” Benyas notes. “Last year we worked our people too hard.”) The repertoire includes orchestral music, chamber music, opera, ballet, and even jazz—the New Arts Jazztet gets involved every year too.

Performances take place not just in Carbondale, but in towns around the region. “It’s important for us to take our show on the road—to perform chamber music, ballet, orchestral programs, opera, in small communities that don’t ordinarily get that kind of exposure to professional music,”

Benyas says. Many of the performances are

free, and aside from evening performances there are always programs for children. (The same is true of the symphony orchestra during the academic year.)

Much research done at the University is very technical. So Benyas finds the festival outreach especially satisfying: “We’re able to share creative activities with the community,” he says, “and I’m proud that the community has embraced us and been so supportive.”

Despite the fact that conducting takes up the majority of his time, two of Benyas’s career highlights came as an instrumentalist. In 1992 he played with the Chicago Symphony under Daniel Barenboim, touring the East Coast and Europe. And in 1996 he played Wagner’s Ring Cycle with the Lyric Opera of Chicago under Zubin Mehta. “As a conductor, I found him really inspiring—his grasp of the music, his ear for the ensemble, his technique. He’s one of the greatest conductors in the world and he’s my favorite,” Benyas says.

Festival concerts in 2008 with opera singer Christine Brewer and violinist

David Kim were conducting highlights for him, as were several Puccini operas done here with theater department colleague Tim Fink.

And then there was conducting famed pianist Emanuel Ax playing Beethoven’s “Emperor” Concerto with the Southern Illinois Symphony Orchestra. “You don’t want to screw that up,” Benyas says, acknowledging he was a little nervous. “But I get more nervous if I have to play a big solo on the oboe,” he says. “Your reed can break, you can have water in the key, your mouth can get dry—any number of things can happen.”

What does Benyas prefer, playing or conducting? It’s a closer call than you might think.

“I love making sound on my oboe,” he says. “When you’re conducting, you’re not producing any sound. But commanding a big mass of sound...when that works, it’s very rewarding too.”

For more info: Edward Benyas, School of Music, benyas@siu.edu. For more about the Southern Illinois Music Festival: SIFest.com.



Benyas congratulates opera singer Christine Brewer after a music festival performance.
Photo by Bob Benyas.

