

'Lefty' trades in horn for baton

BY BILL COUTANT
STAFF WRITER

For Karen Nixon, being a left-handed woman in a job traditionally occupied by right-handed men has not been a handicap.

"If you please the musicians, the word spreads," Nixon said. "Conducting jobs come through musicians."

Conducting the Troy and Pontiac-Oakland Symphony orchestras, and the Farmington Hills-based Group du jour, has been a challenge, but not because of her

sex, she said. The challenge was to convince herself and then her college professor that she wanted to conduct and was willing to throw herself into the work.

For Nixon, who had played the French horn for several years with the Michigan Opera Theatre and freelanced with other orchestras, the idea of conducting was foreign, almost repulsive.

"I had no intentions of being a conductor," she said. "I had become sort of cynical about my work. I would think about how

many notes I had to play and how many dollars I'd get. You sort of lose the whole reason you went into music in the first place."

But that changed when Nixon studied under Gustav Meijer at the University of Michigan and played for him in MOT's production of "The Magic Flute."

"That began my rediscovery of the reason I went into music," she said. "That was in 1986."

After much effort, Nixon finally convinced her mentor that she was more than a horn player. His

method of instruction focused on knowing the music so well, that conducting becomes an extension of the work, she said.

She had to know the music well for her first time conducting.

"I had never stood on a podium," she said. "Here I was conducting Beethoven's Seventh Symphony for my graduate requirement."

And as for being left-handed? "Most people don't notice," she said.



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For that reason, Group du jour combines classical and more contemporary music during performances. In its November performance, the group featured classical music that has been used in films such as "The Raging Bull" and "Moonstruck."

Little response

But so far, the response to the group has been disappointing.

"I was impressed by two things about their performance," said Farmington Hills city councilman and former Mayor Jon Grant. "I was really impressed with their performance. And I was impressed by how few people showed up."

That, vows Grant, must change. He plans to help organize a performance around some sort of party later this year. For now, he and Nixon are hoping people simply attend a Group du jour concert.

"I've asked a lot of people if they knew we had a symphony in Farmington Hills," Grant said. "They looked at me like I fell off a Christmas tree."

Nixon, a Livonia native, has been given a lot of support by her husband, Bill Lane, a consultant with Ford Motor Co. and an accomplished trombone player who adds his talent to Group du jour.

Nixon's mother, Helen, and older brother, Curt, have also passed out fliers and gathered props for the South Seas motif of

Sunday's performance. Sister Cindy Reid helps with promotions and sister Arlene and her husband, Andy, perform in the group.

Strictly professional

Despite the help of "Team Nixon," as she calls them, the group is strictly professional, something unique to Detroit area community symphonies.

"Out of 26 community symphonies in the area, we're the only one made up solely of professional musicians," Nixon said. "They're from Ann Arbor, Toledo, Michigan Opera Theater and Detroit Symphony Orchestra. I know them all and I know what they can do."

Nixon, who jokingly refers to herself as the "Avis" of the family ("I'm second oldest and I try harder"), has been conducting for 10 years with the Troy Symphony and is also conductor and music director of the Pontiac-Oakland Symphony.

She would like to see Group du jour prosper in Farmington Hills, but named the group with the thought of not tying it down to a community.

"I called it Group du jour because it was made up of whoever is available today," she said. "I've been asked why I didn't call it the Farmington Symphony. But I thought that if the community did not support us, then it would be funny to call it that if we played somewhere else."

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