



Musical Notes

Little is left to chance leading up to a performance of a symphony orchestra. There are countless moving parts to align, both on stage and behind the scenes.

PHOTOS BY CORINNA HOFFMAN

“Professional orchestras have so little rehearsal time before a concert that there’s no time to feel them as a chore,” says Jacksonville Symphony Music Director Courtney Lewis. “The adrenaline at rehearsals isn’t that different from a performance. Everyone is expected to be completely on top of everything from the very beginning. So, I might experiment a little, but, really, you have to have made all those kinds of interpretative decisions before the rehearsals begin. There is so much to communicate, explain and adjust in rehearsal that it requires a kind of physical and mental focus that is unique in my life—nothing else, not even performances, require so much of your brain and body in combination. It’s a lot of fun.”

The Symphony’s Associate Conductor Kevin Fitzgerald is of like mind with Lewis. Where some professionals view practice with a level of disdain, the two conductors greatly enjoy rehearsing. “It’s the laboratory of music-making. That being said, in comparison to performing, it is drastically more difficult. Knowing when to stop, what to say, how to say it, and all the thinking on your feet that comes with the rehearsal process takes a lot of brain energy,” says Fitzgerald.

This combination of physical and mental exertion and fun is something few audiences ever see. A performance by an orchestra is the embodiment of a team effort, a group that extends well beyond the musicians on stage. In addition, the hours required to stage a successful concert are numerous. Everything from the sheet music being ready to the lights being in focus will be checked again and again. Throw in a piece of music that’s 200 years old and the chance of something out of tune occurring is always present. So, the rule is practice, practice, practice.

“Every piece usually has a few tricky spots that will require more rehearsal,” Lewis says. “I usually begin rehearsals by playing the piece the whole way through. That gives everyone in the orchestra a sense of my tempi (the speed I’m conducting the music), and a sense of the overall shape of the piece. Then we work on difficult spots. Sometimes those difficult places are a surprise, and I’ll only focus on them because of what happened in the play-through, other times, I’ve known the spots would be difficult from past experience.”

PHOTO COURTESY OF JACKSONVILLE SYMPHONY

"I do most of my preparation for the season in the summer holiday," he continues. "The Jacksonville Symphony takes a break during July, August and most of September, so I have plenty of time to study in depth. I'll listen to a lot of recordings at the start of the process, especially if it's the first time I'm preparing a piece. Then there's a lot of score study at my desk. It's hard to describe how much of this there is. From then on, it's a question of getting to know the music deeply over time, going back to a piece over the weeks, getting to know its intricacies slowly."

As Music Director, the Northern Ireland native Lewis is the face of the Jacksonville Symphony. With conductor's baton in his hand and attired in a tuxedo, his position in front of the orchestra is paramount. The direction of the season and the quality of music presented at any one show will bear his mark. Yet, he's just one in a small army of people needed for each concert. Many in this army toil in anonymity.

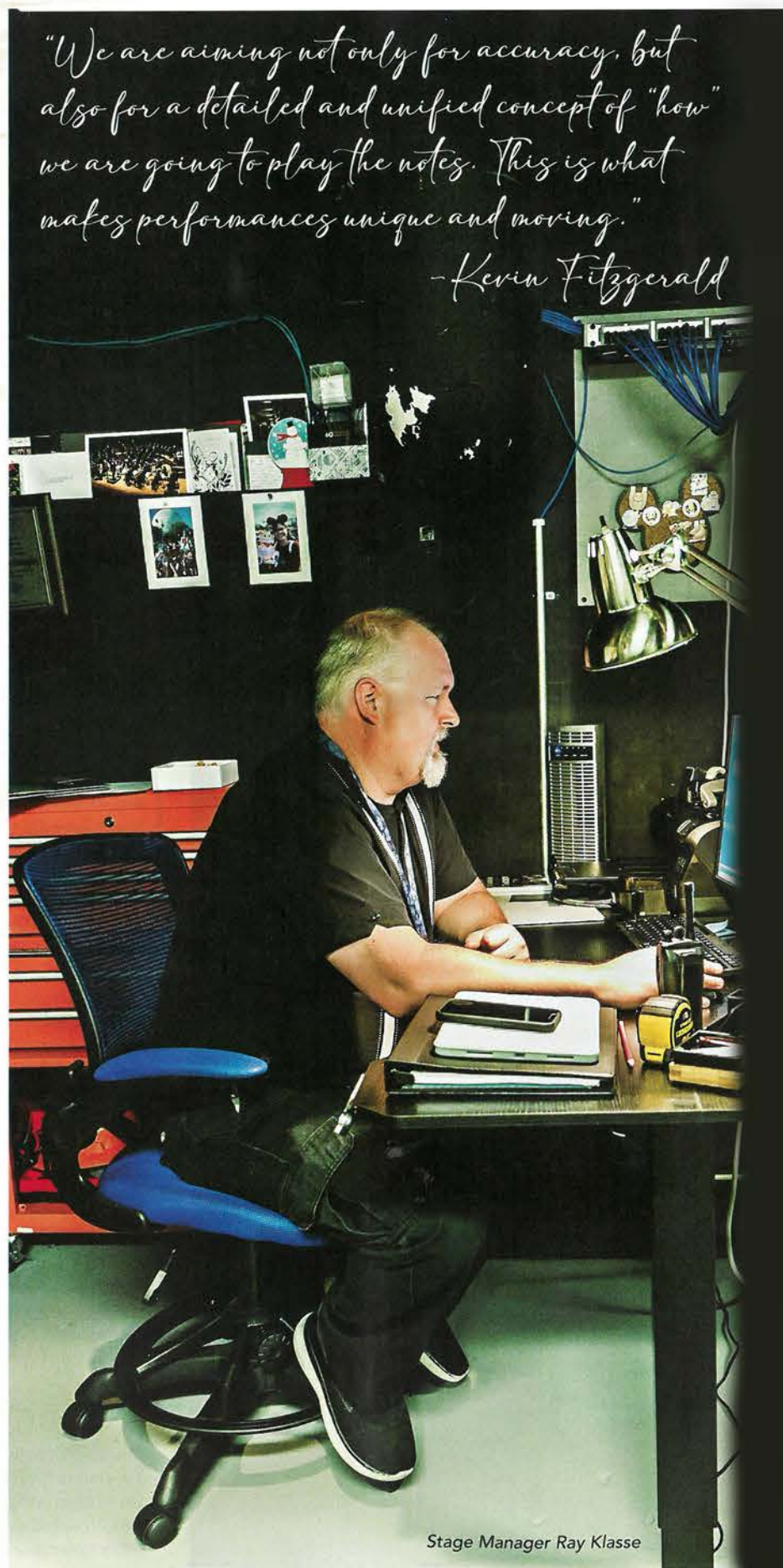
For example, few members of the audience will ever see, let alone recognize his name or face, but among the many people backstage ensuring each performance comes together as planned is Orchestra Personnel Manager Jim Neglia. A New Jersey transplant with more than 30 years in show biz, Neglia is the go-to man for myriad questions and problems. And those questions and problems never stop coming. A series of live events that requires dozens of talented artistic individuals to work in unison is fraught with opportunities for distraction and disagreement. Also, the musicians are part of a union, as are the backstage crew members, and each has very defined sets of workplace rules, can-do and can't-dos. It's Neglia's role to see that all obligations are met without stepping out of bounds with what the unions allow.

If a musician wants a day off, he talks to Jim, the guy who tracks all "service" hours and payroll. Show up late for rehearsals? Softly, but with firm intent, Jim is going to tell you to leave home earlier to get to the concert hall on time. Your locker backstage keeps getting stuck closed? Jim might have a can of WD-40 handy. A violinist has a personal problem with a French horn player? The mediator is going to be found in Jim's small, windowless office across the hall from the wall of musicians' mailboxes. A diva guest performer requires sparkling water and the air-conditioning temperature in the dressing room set to a specific temperature? Leave it to Jim to ensure the exacting requests are fulfilled.

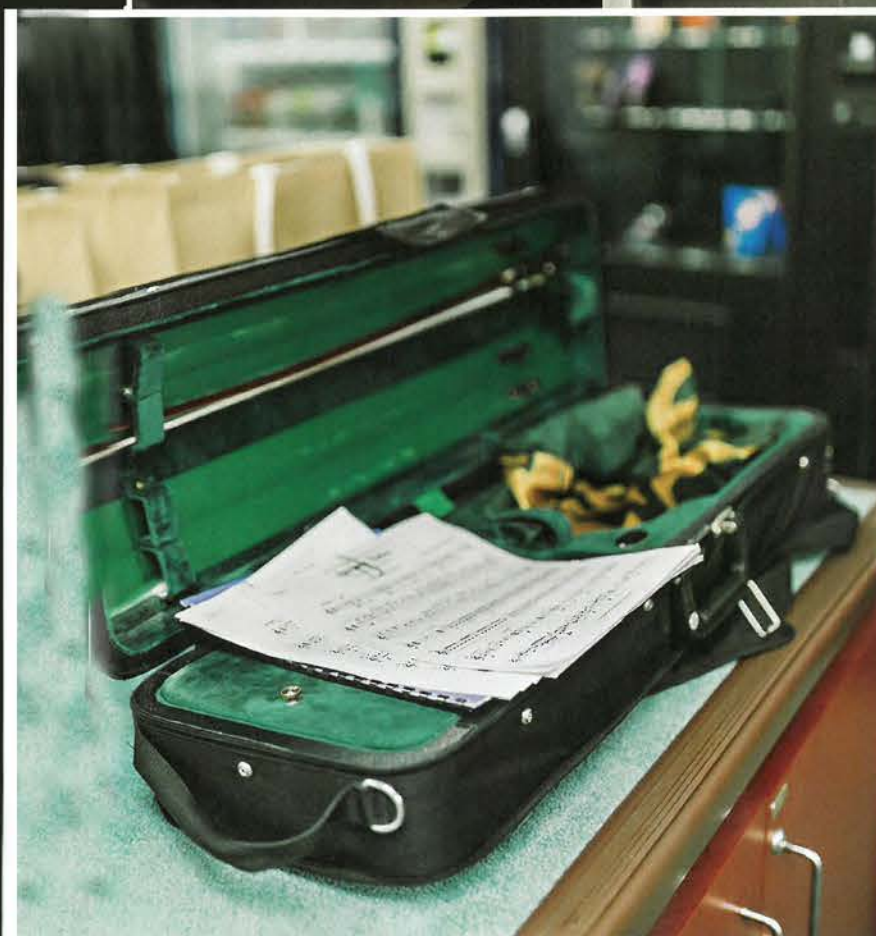
A typical rehearsal might last two-and-a-half hours. And each specific performance has a limited number of rehearsals, usually three or four. The hours rehearsing are closely tabulated by the musicians, their union and Neglia. Following a rehearsal or performance the musicians are free to pursue other artistic endeavors. Many work second jobs as music instructors, or perform in other musical groups or work as freelancers, hired for part-time gigs. However, the roughly nine-month season as set by the JSO is the schedule that all must pay particular attention. That

"We are aiming not only for accuracy, but also for a detailed and unified concept of "how" we are going to play the notes. This is what makes performances unique and moving."

-Kevin Fitzgerald



Stage Manager Ray Klasse



"If things aren't working it's up to me to find a way of inspiring everyone to overcome the technical challenges."
— Courtney Lewis



schedule drives countless dates and requirements throughout the year, not the least of which is will the players have music.

Bart Dunn is the JSO's principal librarian. He's not collecting and sorting overdue books. No, instead, his role is to ensure each musician has the proper and complete set of sheet music for any given performance. The symphony itself owns some sheet music, typically for shows it may play each year such as holiday songs. Some music is considered public domain, meaning it is open for anyone to make copies for performance. However, a significant portion of the organization's annual budget goes to securing the rights to play certain scores in concert.

Most concert sheet music is owned by a small number of publishers. In order to play music from their catalogs, it must be purchased, usually a rental agreement based on the size and length of the order. For the JSO, that order could range from 60 to 90 sets of sheet music. Those sheets will come as hard copies, as music publishers prefer not to send their copyright-protected materials as digital files. It's Dunn's responsibility to see that the adequate number of copies are duplicated and distributed to the musicians for rehearsals and performances.

The centerpiece of his work space is a frequently humming copier. Walls are stacked with blank white pages and industrial strength filing cabinets. Outside in the hall is a head-high wooden rack. Tagged with the names of each instrument, musicians collect their new music here.

In total, the JSO staff numbers approximately 140, including front office, crew and players. For each performance there will be a minimum of four backstage crew members, perhaps up to seven for some shows. Paying close attention to the goings-on long before patrons arrive is Stage Manager Ray Klasse. A proper rehearsal will have the stage set exactly as it would be for a house full of paying guests. This pre-show set-up includes everything from the position of the chairs, music stands, stage risers and larger musical instruments like a timpani, harp or the Symphony's \$250,000 Steinway grand piano.

During a performance one is likely to find Klasse near a backstage console controlling the house lights and video recording equipment. For most shows the lighting design has two primary missions. First, can the audience see the performers? Next, and equally important, can the players see the sheet music? Shadows can add drama but can also make reading a score more difficult. Works such as Prokofiev's Third Piano Concerto and Rachmaninoff's Rhapsody are difficult enough without having to squint.

Working through those difficulties during rehearsals is a crucial part of a conductor's job, particularly for Lewis and the Jacksonville Symphony. "I think the music director has a unique role here. More than any other conductor who works with the Jacksonville Symphony, it's my job to set the expectation of how



"Even when things are difficult it's very important to remember what an incredibly talented and accomplished group of musicians we have here in Jacksonville."

-Courtney Lewis

well we should play," he says. "That means being very receptive to the energy in the room. Sometimes we'll get stuck with something, and that's when it's a good time to take a quick break, or play something else for a while. When we come back to the tricky place everyone will have fresh energy to figure out the problem."

"Navigating these moments diplomatically

is essential for any conductor, but especially when you are new to the organization," adds Fitzgerald, who conducted his first official rehearsal with the Jax symphony in September. "When issues arise, I can be supportive, provide solutions and new ways of thinking about the problem, or ask a question to clarify a musician's understanding. One of my favorite authors Brené Brown says, 'You cannot

shame anyone into greatness,' and I couldn't agree more. Sometimes the best coaching is in what you don't say to the orchestra—how you adjust your gesture or say something neutral can point to the issue without anyone getting singled out.

"When you have an orchestra as good as the Jacksonville Symphony, about 75-85% of the

program will be no problem," Fitzgerald continues. "As you study and prepare, you start to realize where the trickier corners of the piece are. However, there are surprises. A passage you planned to work on could go very well, and something you thought would never be an issue can somehow present a challenge. Beyond timing, there are always musical considerations for every single bar of music, no

matter how technically challenging. We are aiming not only for accuracy, but also for a detailed and unified concept of "how" we are going to play the notes."

When the players and conductor are working as one, magic can happen. Even during a rehearsal. "That doesn't happen very often—we're usually traveling towards a destination

but the arrival point isn't always clear," says Lewis. "Sometimes when the orchestra plays something really well, I'll say, 'Okay, great. Push save!'"

Save it they will. At least for a brief moment. Another concert is likely already scheduled. The practice for that one will begin in a matter of days. The rehearsing starts anew. ✨