

THEPRESS

Engineer changes his tune to compose symphony

Ian B. Murphy/Gatehouse News Service

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It takes precision to conduct plasma physics experiments and build machines that make semi-conductors. Lexington's John Tarrh discovered that during his 30-year career as an electrical engineer and CFO of Applied Science and Technology Inc.

He has since moved on to a second career, one that requires thinking just as precise. He is now a composer, and the New Philharmonia Orchestra is set to perform his first symphony Saturday, April 5, at the First Baptist Church in Newton, and at Medfield High School on April 6.

Tarrh, 60, has loved classical music since he was a child growing up in Virginia. He played percussion through high school, but didn't think he could make a living as a musician so he pursued engineering. He said he just didn't have the role models to believe a successful music career was possible.

After an undergraduate degree at Virginia Polytechnic Institute in electrical engineering, he moved on to MIT to study the same in 1970. Soon he was conducting fusion experiments, and Mozart and Beethoven were the farthest things from his mind.

"I didn't touch music for 20 years, because I just didn't really have the time to pursue it," Tarrh said.

In the 1980s, the funding for his program at MIT was cut. He and his fellow engineers created a company, Applied Science and Technology Inc., to find a way to make money from their plasma physics research. The burgeoning computer business offered just that opportunity, and soon the company was making machines to manufacture semi-conductors.

“We happened to hit at just the right time with the right technology,” Tarrh said.

He served as the CFO for ASTeX, and in the early 1990s he felt a renewed urge for classical music. He joined the Newton Symphony as a percussionist, and in 1995 followed conductor Ronald Knudsen when he created the New Philharmonia Orchestra.

In 2001, ASTeX was bought by MKS Technologies. Tarrh, then 53, suddenly found himself with enough money to retire, and even more time. Tarrh decided to chase his dream and enrolled in the New England Conservatory of Music’s continuing education program.

His wife, Barbara, said the family was blessed to even be able to talk about whether Tarrh should go to music school. She knew of his desire to create classical music — one of their first dates was to the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra, for which Tarrh had season tickets.

“I could see his passion for it, and how he really loved it,” she said.

Barbara Tarrh said once her husband began at the conservatory, it benefited the whole family.

“It was great seeing him less stressed out, and to have him in Lexington rather than France, Britain, or California,” she said.

From NEC’s continuing education program, John Tarrh enrolled in the masters program and received his degree in music theory in 2007. This year, he will receive his second masters in composition, which Tarrh said was his goal all along.

His dream from the beginning was to write a symphony, and last summer he was commissioned by the New Philharmonia to do just that. That work, which he completed in January, will be performed April 5.

“This is the opportunity that most composers hardly ever get,” he said.

Tarrh has yet to hear the entire piece played at once; he’s only attended rehearsals and heard selected pieces.

The two middle movements, which were completed first, were played at NEC by undergraduates last fall. Barbara attended that performance, and for the first time she understood exactly why her husband had locked himself in his office for so long.

“I’d hear snippets coming downstairs, and I said ‘Eh, it sounds good,’” she said. “[At the recital] I was just blown away. It was just so much more fully realized than what I had heard before. The work that goes on very purposely and very privately and away from family life, it has really paid off.”

Ronald Knudsen, conductor and music director of the New Philharmonia, said the piece has a very traditional style, with great rhythms and melodies.

“For a first symphony, it’s really quite good,” Knudsen said.

Tarrh is already working on new music. He is writing for a clarinet quintet, and ideas are swirling in his head for a second symphony. He also wants to write music for a concert band, so his musically inclined sons, Nathan, Andrew, and Evan might play it together while at Lexington High School.

“For so many years, new [classical] music has gotten a bad name, because it’s so complex and so unapproachable that people don’t want to hear it,” Tarrh said. “I think the pendulum is swinging back. I want to write music that players want to play, and that people want to hear.”

New Philharmonia Orchestra CLASSICS III: Community Convergence - from Creative to Mischievous - Celebrate Originality!

Sat, April 5, 7:30 p.m. First Baptist Church in Newton
Sun, April 6, 3 p.m. Medfield High School, Medfield

Tickets are \$25 for adults; \$8 for students. Call 617-527-9717 for information.