

Tubadour: Symphony Silicon Valley tuba star takes spotlight for first time

By Richard Scheinin
Mercury News

Article Launched: 03/07/2008 02:39:22 PM PST

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When Tony Clements grabs his tuba and carries it to the front of the stage of the California Theatre March 15-16 to perform Ralph Vaughan Williams' Tuba Concerto in F minor, he's going "to put some *Italian* in it," he warns. Meaning that he's going to put his own special brand of passion into the British composer's work. That he intends to make his tuba sing, swoop, sail and do pretty much everything else the general public assumes a tuba cannot do.

Clements wants to correct a misconception: that playing the tuba is for bruisers and cut-ups, for the noisy jokesters in the back row of the high school band room. The truth is, Clements may once have been one of those cut-ups. At 53, he is a high-spirited storyteller, famous in local music circles for strapping his tuba to the passenger seat of his Harley-Davidson.

But South Bay audiences also know that for 27

years, first with the old San Jose Symphony and now with Symphony Silicon Valley (with which he performs twice this weekend), Clements has held down the top position of principal tuba, performing with strength and finesse. What audiences may not realize is that these performances will be Clements' first as soloist with a South Bay symphony orchestra. He is more than a little excited.

I visited Clements in his sunny Campbell studio, attached to the house he shares with his wife, Linda, a middle-school band teacher in Newark.

Clements talked about his dad (born Lester di Clementi, he paid for Tony's lessons on a mail carrier's modest salary on Long Island in the early '60s); about teaching at Ohlone College, where he is director of bands, and around the Bay Area; and, most notably, about his love of putting on his tuxedo and heading to the concert hall to perform: "You're dressed right, you're sitting with your pals, and you're making beautiful music," he says. "What could be better?"

Q You're a tuba fanatic, Tony. How did it all begin?

A I was 7. My dad liked Stan Getz, so I put down "saxophone" when they asked what instrument I wanted to play at school. But by the time I got there, the only instrument left was a Sousaphone.

I don't remember *not* playing the tuba. It's been the one consistent thing in my entire life.

Q You're a big guy. Does size help, playing the tuba?

A It definitely helps if you have a large lung

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capacity. It takes a lot of wind and a lot of upper body strength to play. However, the Philadelphia Orchestra's principal tuba spot was won by a 20 year-old woman named Carol Jantsch. (She's now 23). And she's small, but she uses her air very efficiently. Something like 194 people applied to audition, and she beat all the young studs.

Q I'm surprised about this weekend: It's your first big solo spot with the hometown symphony orchestra.

A I've waited 27 years to play a concerto, but I'm not complaining. I got on the schedule once with (conductor) George Cleve and the old symphony, but that was the season we got cut back from 14 concerts to 12, and my concerto was the one that got cut.

Q You've had to reinvent yourself since the old symphony went bankrupt. Symphony Silicon Valley doesn't perform as often.

A This year, I'll get 12 weeks of work. I'm thrilled to have it. But I had the tuba job in San Jose, and there just isn't a full-time tuba job around these days.

I had a 40-week season with the old orchestra, plus I was the personnel manager, and I did 10 weeks of summer festivals. Man, I thought I was set. But then when the old orchestra went down, we all had to reinvent ourselves. I'm not just a tuba player anymore. I teach all over, and I've been doing more conducting at Ohlone College, Stanford, California State University-East Bay, a bunch of places.

Q Tell me about the Vaughan Williams concerto.

A Of all the major concertos for brass instruments, this is among the hardest. It covers a range of three octaves and a minor third; that's a wide range.

I love the piece. Vaughan Williams knows how to write for the instrument. He put it in our key: F minor, and the tuba's in F. It's right in the bread-and-butter range for us tuba players. It's lyrical. It's not hard for the sake of being hard. It's just a fun piece to play.

Q Are you nervous, as soloist?

A It's not something that tuba players do all the time. If you're a violinist or a cellist, you're out in front all the time. I'm one of the back-row boys.

It's more personal pressure than anything else. It's having waited 27 years to do it with my own band. And frankly, being on the back side of my career, it's one of those things where I go, "I hope I do good." Whereas 10 years ago, I wouldn't even have thought about it; I knew I'd nail it.

I'm confident. It's not like I'm scared or anything. But I want to do good, playing with my pals. When you play with the home team, you want to do good. We have a good orchestra here, fabulous musicians, hardworking.

Q You still love what you do.

A I thank God every night. It's easier for a shortstop to get a job in the big leagues than for a tuba player to get a job in an orchestra.

I still have my passion for playing the tuba, my

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passion for making music, and my passion for sharing it with the listeners. I liken my tuba performances to an actor who makes the printed page come to life. That's my job as a musician, to bring my own brand of passion to the composer's intent for the music. And to make my colleagues sound great.

I'll bring Ralph Vaughan Williams' music to life exactly as he intended it. And then I'll color it with my own brand of passion.

And the thing that I never get tired of is to hear people say, "Gee, I didn't know you could play like that on a tuba. I didn't know you could make a tuba sound so beautiful." I crave that response from the listener. When I give a recital, I'm not staring into space. I'm staring straight into the listeners' eyes. I want the audience right there on stage with me. And if I screw up, I want them to go, "Oy!" And if I play beautifully, I want them going, "Oh, isn't that gorgeous?"

Q Do you worry about botching notes?

A Lawyers lose cases. A great baseball player fails 70 percent of the time at the plate. If I crack two notes in a night, that's a lot by the standards of our craft. People talk about the pressure on a ball player. Come on!

Q You've subbed with the San Francisco Symphony, right?

A I subbed in San Francisco once, and it was the best week of my life. It was unbelievable. It just transcended - the level of playing is so high and the excellence achieved by that orchestra is just unbelievable. It was two Februaries ago, and I remember it like it was yesterday. They told me, "You

belong up here."

Q I know you once tried out for the principal spot in the St. Louis Symphony.

A Yup, 15 or 17 years ago. I wanted that job too badly; I practically had my season's tickets picked out for the Cardinals. Then I went in there, and I played poorly.

Q Tell me about your Ohlone College gig. You lead the Ohlone Wind Orchestra and what else?

A One of my bands is a tuba ensemble with about 30 guys that show up on Saturday morning. We do warm-up routines, and then there's a huge body of music for tuba ensemble. I bet in my own library I have about 500 pieces.

The guys come down from Danville and Livermore. I have one guy who comes up from Gilroy. Actually, I have two women in the group, and the rest are guys. We talk about mouthpieces and valve oil; tuba geek stuff.

Q Tony, you've cleaned up your image since you started leading all these groups at Ohlone, Stanford and all the places where you teach and conduct. Isn't that right?

A Yeah, my hair used to be down to my waist! Nobody believed I was a classical musician. They thought I was a plumber or something. I wanted to be taken a little more seriously when I started to do more conducting, so I cut it four or five years ago and gave it to the San Francisco Opera, and they made a wig out of it. They got 15-16 inches of good, thick, Italian brown hair.

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Q I wanted to talk just briefly about your early training. One of your childhood teachers was Bill Barber, a legendary tuba player. He was on Miles Davis's "Birth of the Cool" sessions and played with Gil Evans.

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A That's right. Bill would take the Long Island Railroad from Manhattan out to Lindenhurst every week to give me my lesson. And I remember paying him \$5. My dad didn't earn much as a mail carrier, but he'd pay Bill five bucks each time.

Q Let's finish with a couple of composers. Do you enjoy playing Stravinsky?

A Symphony Silicon Valley is playing the "Rite of Spring" in June. I love that piece. It's got so much fire and passion, especially when the conductor is really prepared. That piece can be an ass kicker.

Q Mahler?

A I hate playing Mahler. He's too long-winded, full of hot air. The only Mahler I really like playing is Mahler One (First Symphony), because there's a tuba solo in the second movement.

Symphony Silicon Valley

Sara Jobin, conductor; Tony Clements, tuba

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