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Lewis

Fields

Groucho

O'Reilly

Twain

Cranky, Rude, Indispensable! The Case For Curmudgeons

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ENCORES AWAY With little musical training, Hurwit used the synthesizer to compose his symphony.

The Big Score

Even with x-ray vision, radiologist Albert Hurwit could hardly have forseen his musical future

WHEN ALBERT HURWIT was eight, he took piano lessons but quit after three years. As a student at Harvard, he wanted to major in music but flunked the music reading test—he never did learn to read music or write notes well. So, when Hurwit called the renowned Hartford Symphony Orchestra in 1997 to ask if they’d be interested in hearing a piece he’d composed, he began by saying, “You don’t know me.” He was right. Why would they know him? He wasn’t a music professor, musician, critic, or even a symphony groupie. He was a radiologist. Nevertheless, the orchestra wound up performing his piece, a five-minute hint of things to come.

Today, this music nobody is a serious somebody. Since the Hartford Symphony Orchestra performed the third movement of his 58-minute Symphony No. 1 last February—on a program with Tchaikovsky and Brahms—the 72-year-old Hartford, Connecticut, resident has received handshakes from strangers on the street. He won a standing ovation at the debut, and one

newspaper reviewer wrote that his work “evokes Mahler.”

Hurwit’s success is astonishing for someone with no formal musical training. Although music was always important to him—at 10, he worked in his father’s hardware store and got paid in classical albums, and as a teenager he wrote a melody that is incorporated into his symphony—the

Hartford native got sidetracked. He went to medical school at Tufts in Boston and for 25 years had a thriving radiology practice. “All the time I had music inside my head,” explains Hurwit. “I felt it in my heart and soul and knew I had to get it out.”

He rigged up an elaborate system of keyboard synthesizers, computers, printers, and audio equipment in his second-floor study. Complex software programs help him convert the sounds he plays into musical scores. In 1986, with his three kids on their own, Hurwit retired in order to turn his complete attention to composing.

“Symphonic themes began bubbling to the surface,” Hurwit recalls. “I would wake up in the night and hear music. It was inspiring, exciting.” By 2000, he’d written the first movement of a symphony. He asked Michael Lankester, who was then music director of the Hartford Symphony Orchestra, to listen to it. “I had to know,” he says. “Was I being ridiculous to think about writing a symphony? Because, if I were, I didn’t want to waste years of my life.”

Lankester turned out to be instrumental in Hurwit’s success. After listening to what had been composed so far, the conductor agreed to teach Hurwit the formal structure of a symphony and help him get it into shape. “I have never heard of another untrained musician who wrote a symphony, and to have it performed by a major orchestra is extraordinary,” says Lankester.

As a physician, Hurwit used to dread waking up at 3 A.M. to fret about his patients. “Now when I wake up in the middle of the night, I say, ‘wonderful,’ put on my headphones so I don’t disturb my wife, and work until five in the morning if I want,” he says. “I was so disciplined my entire life; this is such a luxury. I don’t have any set schedule. I can go for weeks without being inspired and then spend six days straight in my studio without breathing. Sometimes I’m so moved I get emotional—I laugh, I shudder when my feelings turn into music.”