

[Home](#)

[Book of Lists Online](#)

[Editorial Calendar 2006](#)

[Editorial Submissions](#)

[Tech Directory](#)

[Reprints/Back Issue](#)



HBJ Today
Hartford business news, delivered daily via e-mail.
Subscribe Today!
[Click Here](#)



Know someone who is young, energetic and successful in the business world?
Nominate him or her for the Hartford Business Journal's 2006 40 Under Forty Awards!
40 under forty
CELEBRATING YEARS
[Click here](#)

CURRENT ISSUE •
FEBRUARY 27, 2006

VOLUME 14 NUMBER 17



Music of the soul

Family odyssey moves retired doctor to compose symphony; world premiere of acclaimed "Remembrance" set for March

By Carol Latter > [GO BACK](#)

Writing a critically acclaimed symphony is quite an accomplishment for any composer, let alone for a man who lost his chance to major in music at Harvard in the 1950s because, although he could play music well by ear, he flunked a sight reading test administered by the head of the department. "Medicine," he notes, was "a back-up plan."

After graduating from Tufts Medical School in 1957, Hurwit enjoyed a lucrative career as a physician, serving as a hospital-based radiologist for many years. The position afforded Hurwit and his wife Joan a comfortable existence,

and provided the means to raise three children in comfortable surroundings. But for someone who "went into medicine because I liked people," the attraction of reading films in a rather isolated setting eventually began to pale.

In 1975, 24 years after moving back to his hometown of Hartford, he decided it was time for a change. "I was driving to work one day, and I thought, 'My life is pretty good. Professionally, it's a 'B' to a 'B-plus.' I make a pretty good living -- but it's not an 'A' existence.' "

What would raise the grade, he decided, was "to be able to run my office without hospital administration telling me what kind of equipment to buy, and who to hire. But most of all, I wanted to

Photo/JAKE KOTEEN



Albert Hurwit composes music using synthesizers and an Apple computer, at his home in Hartford.



spend more time with patients.”

By this time, his three children were in college — at Harvard, Duke and Brown — and there were hefty tuition bills to pay. Yet despite the financial risks associated with striking out on his own, Hurwit “borrowed a lot of money” and opened his own practice, with a specialization in mammography.

“From a business point of view, it was probably a dumb decision. All that would have had to happen was for me to get an attack of appendicitis, and I probably would have ended up as a hospital worker somewhere,” he says, only half-joking. “For the first nine months, I didn’t draw any money, but then things kind of took off.”

Within 10 years, Hurwit’s practice had grown significantly, with an expanded staff, the latest in medical technology and several satellite offices. And Hurwit was enjoying personally attending to his patients, usually giving them the results of their tests the same day. “To me, it was an extremely fulfilling practice,” he says.

By his own admission, Hurwit worked a little too hard at his chosen profession. “From 1983 to 1986, I was a compulsive nutcase,” he says. On top of long workdays, “I was up every night and on weekends, doing administrative work.”

He was also very active in a number of worthy but time-consuming causes — including Physicians for Social Responsibility, which held an eight-day conference in Connecticut that drew international attention, and the Media Project, an organization that placed ads in national magazines, urging people to become informed about nuclear issues. He was also asked to sit on the Council of Economic Priorities, a New York-based organization concerned with corporate responsibility.

But as much as he enjoyed these volunteer activities and his medical career, some need inside him remain unfulfilled. “Just at that time, the music really started to bubble out of my soul,” Hurwit says.

The music was inspired by the history of his family — Jews who moved from Prague, Czechoslovakia to

Photo/Courtesy **ALBERT HURWIT**



Albert Hurwit’s symphony, “Remembrance,” was inspired by his family, some of whom immigrated to Connecticut in the early 1900s. Shown in this picture taken in New Britain around 1912 are his maternal

Russia during the pogroms of the 1800s, then emigrated to Connecticut in the early 1900s to find a better life, knowing they would never see older members of their family again.

The melodies evoked by his ancestors' odyssey continued to have an emotional hold on Hurwit. Soon, instead of waking up at night to attend to medical paperwork, he was being woken by the music inside his head and his heart. And he knew he had to do something about it.

In 1986, with his three children now self-sufficient, he weighed his choices. "I loved everything I was doing, but I knew I couldn't do everything." And the music wouldn't wait any longer.

He tried to work part-time for six months, dividing his time between music and medicine, "but because of my compulsion as a physician, I knew I couldn't do either one justice. I decided I would retire."

Hurwit had composed short pieces of music through the years, preserving them through a variety of methods — ranging from elementary music recording systems to scribbles on paper to a self-created numbering system that substituted numbers for musical notes. He later replaced those simplistic systems with sophisticated computer software, synthesizers and recording equipment, creating a musical study on the second floor of his Hartford home. But he still lacked the musical training usually required to become a composer.

Hurwit notes that while most composers begin at a very young age, study music for years, are masters of at least one instrument and devote their lives to practicing their craft, his exposure to classical music was limited.

Between the ages of eight and 11, he took three years of piano lessons. "I was lazy, but I was blessed with a good ear, and I bluffed my way through," he remembers.

At the age of 10, he worked in his father's hardware store on Park Street in Hartford. In lieu of pay, he asked for some 78 RPM classical records that someone had dropped off at the store, "and I loved to listen to them." At the age of 16, he suffered an injury in a sporting event and while recuperating, began picking out increasingly complex songs on a piano. But he couldn't have guessed that a song he wrote during that period, composed by ear, would find its way into the fourth movement of his symphony more than 50 years later.

He refers to that as the "idiot savant part of the story. But I guarantee I'm more idiot than savant," he adds self-deprecatingly.

His path to musical recognition began in the mid-1990s, after he heard Shirley Furey, executive director of the Hartford Symphony Orchestra (HSO) on the radio on his way home from work. He called Furey and pitched her a cabaret song he had written, hoping Barbara Cook, whom he describes as “the world’s best cabaret singer,” would sing it during an upcoming performance in Hartford.

The song was rejected, but Furey agreed to pass along a digital recording of a five-minute adagio Hurwit had written to Michael Lankester, then director of the HSO. A few weeks later, Lankester summoned Hurwit to his office and told him that the adagio would be played by the full orchestra on two nights, in the 2,800-seat auditorium of Bushnell Theater.

Hurwit maintained his composure until he got back to his car in the parking lot. “Then I rolled up the windows, turned on the radio and screamed.”

The 1997 performance of the adagio got “a nice reception,” and was followed up in 2002 with a 15-minute piece, also performed at the Bushnell, that would become part of the third movement of his symphony.

Soon, people began encouraging him to write longer pieces, but while Hurwit believed there was a symphony inside of him, waiting to come out, he knew he didn’t have the knowledge required to structure a work of that magnitude.

“I kind of knew a symphony was a big deal,” he says with considerable understatement. “But they had all encouraged me, so I started.” Even then, he was able to laugh at his own “chutzpah” at taking on such an overwhelming task.

“I knew the odds were enormously stacked against me. I said, ‘I’m not only going to design the Taj Mahal, I’m going to build it myself.’ That’s beyond self-confidence.”

He wrote the first movement of the symphony over the next several months, and invited Lankester to his home to listen to it, requesting brutal honesty.

Lankester liked it so much that he volunteered the next two years to help. Hurwit was completely responsible for writing the music, with Lankester teaching Hurwit about a symphony’s structure, handwriting the notes on the page, and making suggestions for improvement along the way. “Sometimes,” remembers Hurwit, “we would work for hours and hours.”

When the hour-long symphony was complete, the pair chose the Bulgarian National Radio Symphony Orchestra over the London Symphony Orchestra and the Prague Symphony Orchestra to record it, because they would have more time — nearly a week — to

complete the task.

Four companies agreed to produce the CD, including MSR Classics, which put it out in March 2005. While classical CDs don't sell many copies, he says — “it's the worst business proposition in the world” — it's gratifying for him to know he is leaving a legacy to his family, honoring their heritage.

He also loves to see the joy the music brings to others, and to realize he may have inspired others to follow their dreams. He recounts a letter he received from a Trinity College student — the parent of the child — who wrote to him, noting she was going through a difficult divorce. The letter read in part, “If you can do this, I can go to law school.”

For Hurwit, writing a symphony has been tremendously rewarding. “I've had enormous fulfillment in medicine, and it's the same kind of feeling,” he says of his music. “The feeling that you're doing some good in the world.”

The West Hartford Symphony Orchestra is also very glad to play a pivotal role in the symphony's premiere. The WHSO's founding music director Richard Chiarappa, says he liked the music as soon as he heard it, and immediately approached Hurwit about having the WHSO perform it.

Although symphonies are always extremely very cautious in selecting music, to ensure that a performance will be a financial success, Hurwit's lack of experience as a composer and his dint of music training was never a factor, he says. “Once I heard the music, it didn't cross my mind. The music is what spoke to me.”

The concert performances, slated for Sunday, March 5 at 3 p.m. and Monday, March 6 at 7:30 p.m. at Town Hall Auditorium, 50 South Main St., West Hartford, will feature Hurwit's symphony as the second part of the program. Solo performances will make up the first part.

Chiarappa says among the orchestra's performers, “there's a real sense of pride. This will leave a mark on people that they'll always remember, I think.”

Barbara Caraceni, president of the WHSO, agrees. “I just think it's a marvelous opportunity to have a world premiere of not only a living composer, but someone born and raised in the Hartford area,” she says. “It's something that's so rare — it's a true joy to be a part of it.”

For ticket information, call 521-4362 or visit www.whso.org. Information on Hurwit's CD is available at www.CDFreedom.com/alberthurwit or www.alberthurwit.com.



Editor's note: Our new series, New Directions, features people who have changed their careers or life paths in mid-life or later. If you know of someone who has made an interesting career change, contact us at 236-9998, ext. 22, or clatter@hbjournal.com.

