

Youth orchestra finds new Escondido home



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By [Pat Maio \(/staff/pat-maio/\)](#) | 3:53 p.m. Jan. 13, 2016



Piccolo player Kevin Moore laughs at his efforts while rehearsing a part of "Variations on America" during rehearsal for the San Diego Civic Youth Orchestra at Classical Academy High School in Escondido. *San Diego Union-Tribune*

Escondido — After nearly three decades with the San Diego Civic Youth Orchestra, music director and conductor Robert Gilson has finally found his rhythm.

The 72-year-old Gilson is enjoying a period of relative calm, after several years of challenges. During the past 10 years, he suffered a heart attack, watched as close family members passed away and lost his Lake Hodges home to the 2007 Witch Creek fire, one of the largest blazes in San Diego County history.

"It changed everything," said Gilson, who also retired in 2007 from a long teaching career at Palomar College, which left the orchestra without its own permanent rehearsal space for the next seven years.

"That was a very tough year for me."

But Gilson's persistence and leadership has paid off for members of the orchestra, who range in age from 5 to their mid-20s. Many say performing with the group has shaped their lives in untold ways.

"The opportunities you get are unmatched by any other orchestras in San Diego County," said 17-year old Scott Watson, a senior with Mt. Carmel High School in Poway. "If there's someone thinking of joining an orchestra, you'll not find any other that plays the Nutcracker ballet or that is going to Disney (Concert) Hall."

Watson, who joined the orchestra as a trombone player when he was 13, said Gilson pushed him to excel by placing him with older musicians and expecting him to keep up.

"It was terrifying. I never played with that caliber of musicians before," said Watson, who plans to study trombone performance or music education in college.

The orchestra draws roughly 150 musicians from all of San Diego County and southwestern Riverside County. After losing its rehearsal space at Palomar, the group moved around for several years before inking a deal in 2014 to rent space at the Classical Academy High School in Escondido. Many academy students have since joined the group.

The orchestra is among several such performance groups in the region, including the prestigious San Diego Youth Orchestra, which has 400 members, and the Mainly Mozart Youth Orchestra, which holds concerts in San Diego's coastal communities and a festival every summer in Balboa Park. Those groups sell ticket packages that can rise to hundreds of dollars, but the San Diego Civic Youth Orchestra sticks with tickets at \$10 apiece for its performances at the California Center for the Arts, Escondido, Gilson said.

"We want people to come," he said.

The original San Diego Civic Youth Orchestra was founded in 1956 by Daniel Lewis, a former concertmaster of the San Diego Symphony. Lewis was a trained violinist who chalked up a wide variety of connections with other big-name orchestras, including the Los Angeles Philharmonic and others in Pasadena, Atlanta, Seattle and Louisville, Ky. The youth orchestra was based in La Mesa for roughly 30 years.

Eventually, membership dwindled. In 1986, the North County Civic Youth Orchestra, started by Gilson and other local musicians, absorbed the San Diego group and took on its name. Rehearsals moved to Palomar College in San Marcos.

The combined orchestra thrived and regularly traveled and performed internationally from 1996 to 2008. When the Great Recession hit, the globe-trotting ended.

Twenty-year-old Laura Bouck, who is a junior biology major at Cal State San Marcos, joined the orchestra when she was 7. A violinist, she has more recently served as a backup conductor for Gilson.

She fondly recalled the orchestra's last international trip, in 2008 to Australia and New Zealand.

"We got to see where they filmed 'Lord of the Rings' movie trilogy," said Bouck. "This didn't have anything to do with music, but it was fun."

The orchestra was recently among four groups from across the nation selected to participate in the West Coast Youth Orchestra Festival at the Walt Disney Concert Hall in June. Also performing will be the Palos Verdes Strings, from Rancho Palos Verdes; the Southern California Youth Philharmonic, based in Yorba Linda; and the Maryland Classic Youth Orchestra, from Bethesda, Md.

For more information, visit civicyouthorchestra.org.

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