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Behind-the-Scenes with the Mississippi Symphony Orchestra's New Concertmaster

By Greg Waxberg

The audience in Thalia Mara Hall on October 30, 2004, got the first glimpse of the Mississippi Symphony Orchestra's new concertmaster, **Marta Kirk**, who comes to Jackson from a part-time position with the La Crosse Symphony Orchestra in Wisconsin. The 38-year-old native of Poland occupies the chair vacated by Robert McNally, who retired from the post after 29 seasons. Her official appointment begins in January 2005.

Eight days before that October concert, Kirk visited the studios of Mississippi Public Broadcasting to talk about her background and the multiple facets of being a concertmaster, the leading violinist in an orchestra. The concertmaster is sort of an unknown player - some of what she does is obvious to an audience, like walking out before the conductor to tune the orchestra and playing solos in pieces that do not require soloists. However, most of what a concertmaster does is not obvious to an audience because much of her work is accomplished during rehearsals, and, even then, the concertmaster might not know, at first, what the conductor expects.

"Every conductor is different, and they treat the concertmaster differently," Kirk says. "One conductor might want you to make comments to the section and show them techniques - especially if the conductor is not a string player, they'll want you to be more involved that way. Other conductors want you to be quiet. Some conductors don't want you to do the editing of the music. They'll do it by themselves, but that's kind of rare, I believe. There's no rule as to how a concertmaster should behave."

What Kirk is certain about is how she wants to lead, based largely on watching other concertmasters and reading articles. "It's very important to be very kind to your section, because often even good concertmasters can be a little bit condescending because they feel they're the leader so they're better than everybody else. That's not how you're going to keep people happy. You have to involve yourself and say 'we should do this' and make sure there's a lot of positive feedback and compliment your section," she says.

This role of leadership within the orchestra feels like an extension of her upbringing. "I have to lead. I enjoy that - I'm the only child, so I enjoy leadership!" She is the daughter of pianists and grew up in a musical environment, and even though she was frequently under the piano while her parents practiced, and even though she started playing piano, she didn't become pianist number three in the family.

"I remember some pieces of music, especially by Chopin, that I can see myself under the piano as a child. I started on the piano and my parents told me that they asked for a violin. They thought it was a good idea because it seems like violin players have more opportunities to be in an ensemble, to be with people, to share their music. With pianists, they always felt like they were somewhat lonely - they're a duo so they had each other - but it's very hard to get any kind of position together. There's only one pianist in an orchestra. They said I expressed interest and wanted a violin for Christmas."

Kirk was six at the time and gave her first concert at age seven, playing the Frere Jacques Variations with her father at the keyboard. She was 17 when she moved to the United States, right after completing high

school (the Karol Szymanowski Music Lyceum in Warsaw), although she had performed at Interlochen. Among the competitions in which she participated were the Wieniawski International Violin Competition in Poland and the Sibelius International Violin Competition in Finland - she was a semifinalist in both. She also benefited from scholarships and fellowships at Tanglewood and The Peabody Conservatory of Music, among others, and it was at the Peabody Conservatory that she received an Artist Diploma, a very competitive performance degree.

She is active as an instructor, having spent seven years teaching at a university in Tacoma, Washington, and, since 1999, Kirk has been an Adjunct Professor at St. Mary's University in Winona, Minnesota. She attends music festivals during the summers and has been a faculty member at festivals in Washington and Utah.

No less impressive than Kirk's competitions and her involvement with education is a partial list of the great conductors under whom she has played, including Seiji Ozawa, Gennady Rozhdestvensky and Leonard Bernstein, of whom she has particularly fond memories.

"I found Bernstein extremely inspiring, warm and emotionally involved in the music. It was very fulfilling to work with Bernstein. He was a kind person. We were young students, college-age. He really liked to work until he had his results, so, at Tanglewood for example, nobody objected to that at first. We just worked through dinner. Everybody was so in awe of him that they didn't seem to care. One time we played the Sibelius Second Symphony, and there's a moment in there where it kind of tapers off, and then there's a sudden chord, and he literally jumped three feet off the ground."

Speaking of a sudden chord brings us back to one of the principal leadership qualities of a concertmaster: coordinating the string players. Near the top of the list, if not at the top, is the bowing, which ensures that the players move their bows up and down simultaneously. "It's not quite as simple as it looks and sounds because, depending on which direction you go, there's different pressure. It sounds different. If you play the lower part of the bow - the frog - it will be much louder, more emphasized and more forceful. If we want to play something really, really gentle, we're probably not going to play with the frog. We'll play with the upper half of the bow, which is lighter, simply because the arm is further away so there's less weight," Kirk says, playing an imaginary violin to demonstrate.

Symbols are marked in the music so that each player has the same indications for bowing, but there are also matters of lifting the bow, bouncing the bow and other intricacies. "There are so many variations that all of that has to be decided by me. It's not just bowing. It's articulation, expression and sometimes dynamics or making sure we're following the dynamics in the music," she says.

Kirk also edits the music for wrong notes and uses her body to lead. "I'm following the conductor, but the concertmaster is a reflection of the conductor. For entrances, you make motions. You lift your violin a little bit. You just make motions like you would when you're playing by yourself, but they're just a little bit more exaggerated. [The conductor] can't make everybody play together instrumentally. He can make the motions, but everybody is going to interpret it slightly differently. The concertmaster is there to physically start the note," she says.

That is particularly important for notes that are finished almost as soon as they start: plucked notes.

"Pizzicati is the most common problem. It's harder for the strings to play together because it's so immediate. You have to go 'pluck' and that's it. It's like ten players playing harpsichord and trying to match them together. It's very hard," Kirk says.

In her spare time, she performs with her parents in nursing homes, and her father even plays some of the music on an accordion. Her daughter also has the music bug - an excellent ear and constantly at the piano. After our conversation, which took place approximately one month after her audition, she and her daughter were on their way, and Kirk was preparing to tackle Weber's Overture to Oberon, Brahms' Violin Concerto and Beethoven's Fifth Symphony with the orchestra. Now, it's on to Elgar and Tchaikovsky as she is welcomed to Mississippi.

Greg Waxberg is Music Director of Mississippi Public Broadcasting Radio. He has written for orchestras and opera companies, and his essay about Maestro James Levine was published on FanFaire.com.