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## Marin 10: From campus to cantata

*Can the former COM pres help the symphony strike a chord with youth?*

by **Don Speich**

Some 70 years ago F. Scott Fitzgerald famously said, "There are no second acts in American lives." Often this pithy quote is pulled out and dusted off for use in stories (such as this one) to demonstrate that Fitzgerald was wrong. Second acts abound in this country's history (Ronald Reagan comes to mind), and nowhere is this more evident than with Marin County's Fran White.

White is the high-powered, intensely driven former president of the College of Marin who has, since her retirement last year, morphed into a powerful force in the county's classical music scene. She recently became the chairwoman of the board of the Marin Symphony and her new mission, among other things, is to broaden the fan base—particularly children—of the 59-year-old institution.

Board members who were interviewed say that White's talents in administration, fundraising, community outreach and passion for classical music make her a natural to lead the symphony at this time in its history. And White could not be happier.

"I'm having a ball," she said in a recent interview. "I'm having the time of my life."

It certainly is a more peaceful time compared to the community college problems and controversies—many if not all of which she inherited when she became president of the College of Marin—that captured local headlines and seemed never ending. Enrollment seemed to be in a downward spiral, the college faced a loss of accreditation, questions about how to spend money from a bond measure for restoring old facilities and building new ones peppered her administration as well as the college's board of trustees—and, perhaps most enduring, there was the fractious faculty, a vocal minority of which was unrelenting in its demands that White be fired by the board.

A classical composition is, among other things, punctuated by points and counterpoints, which ultimately blend into exquisite harmony. The initial-to-middle years of White's tenure at COM featured distinct points and counterpoints, loud and ultimately disruptive, which did not lead to harmony but rather to jarring dissonance and irresolution.

Ultimately the controversies, the problems, the rancor were successfully addressed. Enrollment picked up, the redevelopment program got on track and, perhaps most important of all, accreditation was assured. White is proud of her role in resolving all of what at one time seemed intractable problems.

Reflecting on her years at the college, White says, "I look back and smile a lot."

The faculty, primarily the college's academic senate (comprising faculty members), was key in stabilizing the campus.

"I must give credit to the faculty who have turned the institution around," she said. "The academic senate stood up. I smile about that."

She said it was of prime importance to her to not leave the college "bankrupt—financially, educationally or in developing a successful building program."

The college, she said, "improved over six years [her time in office]. I'm proud of it."

Those years and the ones in academia preceding them can be viewed as White's first act, the one for which she had trained for a career in education.

Since her retirement, she has served as a consultant to community college districts, particularly in the area of strategic planning. She also has served on the symphony board, driven primarily by her love for classical music.

She grew up in a home that was musical. Her mother was a trained classical pianist. "It was great to hear music all the time," she said.

She was approached last year by some colleagues on the board and asked if she would consider leading the board, and, she said to herself, "Why not?"

Steve Machtinger has been a violist in the symphony and a member of the board for 10 years. He and other board members have nothing but high praise for White.

"We are very fortunate to have her," he said. "She is an outstanding administrator, has experience with [reaching out to] the public, passion and leadership skills.

"The main thing the symphony needs at this point is the ability to reach out to a broader Marin community who do not realize who we are."

He said the "audience has not been growing at the same rate that the orchestra has grown" in both its size, quality and number of symphonies performed (at present five a year).

He and other board members said a key priority is to increase knowledge of and membership in the Marin Youth Symphony. Currently the young musicians (most of them high-school age) perform three times a year at the College of Marin.

Board member Leslie Miller said one challenge facing White is "how to let people know how exciting classical music is." Young people in particular, she said, frequently know little if anything about classical music.

White is the ideal person to take on this task, Miller said, because "she had her finger on the pulse of the community." Board member Renee Rymer also is enthusiastic about White and her leadership abilities. "She's a real gem," Rymer said. She also stressed the need for the symphony to reach out to Marin's youths. White, she noted, referring to White's career in education, "has lots of experience with young people."

One thing White and board members are excited about is the upcoming 75th anniversary of the Golden Gate Bridge. To celebrate the event next May, the symphony has commissioned composer Rob Kapilow to create a symphony that celebrates the world-renowned bridge. It will be performed next year on May 6 and 8 on a program also featuring Beethoven's joyous 9th Symphony.

Board member Machtinger talked about the intriguing approach Kapilow is taking to compose the symphony. He is going about Marin asking a wide range of adults, teens and children this one question: What does the Golden Gate Bridge sound like?

For White, perhaps it sounds like a Chopin sonata played by her mother many years ago, planting the seed that would blossom decades later as the curtain rose on Fran White's second act.

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