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Feature: Classical gas

For some local musicians, the symphony life plays more like a freeway jam...

by Jacob Shafer

"It's a high-stress job—you have to sit in traffic a *lot*."

"My car has 330,000 miles on it. My accelerator leg hurts."

"You drive so far and so long. I just feel like I'm putting my life in my hands."

"I have times when I'm ready to chew on my steering wheel."

Whose complaints are these? An interstate trucker, perhaps? A bus driver? A cabbie?

Nope. They come from members of the Freeway Philharmonic, a dedicated, road-weary collection of classical musicians who traverse the state's highways in search of work, playing gigs everywhere from San Rafael to Monterey to Fresno—sometimes on the same day.

Seven of these odometer-abusing artists—most of whom perform regularly with the Marin Symphony—are the focus of *Freeway Philharmonic*, a documentary from filmmaker Tal Skloot, premiering January 24 at the Rafael Film Center and airing January 27 on KQED.

"The passion and dedication of these musicians in the face of so many daily challenges is what makes this such a compelling story," says Skloot, a Mill Valley native who studied music at UC Santa Cruz and once roomed with two Freeway Philharmonic players. "Driving six, seven hours a day, this constant pursuit of wanting to live your art. They don't make a lot of money. They do it because they love it."

As is almost always the case with love, a healthy dose of sacrifice is required. The film shows its subjects not only idling in traffic, but eating at fast food restaurants (one musician says that's how she remembers which town she's in—by what eatery she's noshing at), rushing to make gigs on time and, in the process, missing out on other aspects of their life—including family, friends and nonmusical interests.

It's the classic "starving musician" story, but with a twist—instead of drum kits and electric guitars, these guys and gals are toting violins and cellos. (Also: much more cultured groupies). That may seem incongruous at first; symphonic music is generally associated with pristine, sweeping venues and well-dressed, affluent patrons—not with workaday struggles.

But the more you think about it, the more it makes sense. While bars, rock clubs and open

mics are a dime a dozen for the three chord-strumming set, there aren't so many opportunities for classical musicians to practice their craft. Hence the hectic travel schedules, the willingness to go where the jobs are.

"What's especially hard for these [classical musicians] is that it's nonstop," says Skloot. "They're playing these contracts year in and year out, and still having to maintain their passion and focus."

For most of the Freeway Philharmonic players, the "season" runs from September to May. In addition to various regional orchestras, musicians play with chamber ensembles and, especially in the summer, at festivals.

"I'll hit a patch about January where I'm really sick of it," says Freeway Phil vet Karen Shinozaki, an assistant principal violinist with Marin Symphony. "But it's always a cycle."

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THOUGH MEMBERSHIP IN Freeway Philharmonic is unofficial—there's no card you can carry in your wallet, no meetings or dues to pay—the group's members seem like a tight-knit bunch. They carpool together, lunch together and, in the process of playing myriad gigs side-by-side, share a kind of easy, comfortable musical rapport. Even though they're sharing their talents with different audiences in different venues, playing different pieces—a situation that could make things disjointed—there's an undeniable cohesion that comes across.

Each performance feels special and immediate, and that's reflected in the feedback Freeway Phil musicians say they get.

"Ultimately, we didn't become musicians just to play for ourselves, nor do we just want glory for playing for others," says cellist Robin Bonnell of Berkeley, who, with his long, unkempt hair and singular, expressive style of play, stands out in the symphonic crowd. "It's more a matter of wanting to communicate a certain spirit of the music. So when somebody gives you feedback that your performance has changed their mood in a positive way, that's very rewarding."

Most Freeway Phil musicians echo Bonnell's sentiments—they love what they do. But for many, the ultimate goal is to earn a permanent position in a major orchestra. For classical musicians, that's the Show, the Big Leagues. It means security and stability, both financial and personal—but it's also an extremely tough gig to get. In the film, one musician laments that the last time a chair in his specialty became available at the San Francisco Symphony was 1994.

The window rarely opens, and when it does there are a lot of talented people trying to climb through.

"Getting to that level is so difficult but it's what most of these musicians are striving for," says Skloot. At the same time, he adds, there's something special about the Freeway Phil lifestyle and the music it produces. "These are good orchestras where they're playing, Marin Symphony and elsewhere. The performances I filmed and that I attend at these smaller venues are very spirited; they have their own signature that comes in large part from the

musicians."

Though a desire to focus his film on the musicians and their personal stories prevented Skloot from including interviews with patrons, he recognizes the important role audiences play in keeping regional orchestras alive and vital.

"Marin Symphony is a perfect example," he says. "The audience there is incredibly supportive and passionate. It's just a very loyal fan base—there's a real connection with the music."

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MARIN SYMPHONY'S FIRST official concert was staged at Marin Catholic High School in 1952. The company was subsequently put up by College of Marin and Dominican University before finally settling in its permanent home at the Marin Center. Now, better than five decades after its inception, the symphony has grown to include some 85 musicians, many of them members of the Freeway Phil.

The company's 55th season is currently under way. A pair of shows slated for January 20 and 22 will feature Ukrainian-born virtuoso violinist Vadim Gluzman playing selected works from legendary Russian composers Stravinsky and Tchaikovsky. In February, conductor Alasdair Neale will guide the orchestra through a collection of classical pieces utilized in famous films, offering patrons a rare chance to hear Mozart alongside John Williams—the man responsible for the eminently hummable *Star Wars* theme, among many others.

Looking further ahead, the symphony will be joined in March by guest cellist Hai-Ye Ni. Then, in April, the 2007-08 season will conclude with a tandem performance by the orchestra and Marin Symphony Chorus, joining forces to bring Carl Orff's iconic *Carmina Burana* to life.

That eclectic, something-for-everyone program is typical of the Marin Symphony, and shows why in-county patrons see it as more than "just" a regional orchestra.

"I can't speak to other [regional companies] but I'm proud of the way our symphony rises to the occasion," says Gill Isaacson of Novato. "I take relatives from back East to [the shows] when they come to visit and they're always impressed. I cross the bridge for lots of things, but for the symphony I can stay close to home."

Susan Dougherty of San Rafael has been attending Marin Symphony performances for over 15 years. She appreciates the company's varied, imaginative repertoire, but says above all, it's the skill of the musicians that keeps her coming back.

"I've been to other shows, seen the [San Francisco Symphony], New York, Chicago. There's beauty in that precision but, for me, these [local] musicians have plenty of talent. And I think maybe doing what they do in a smaller area means they can connect more with us in the audience."

Francis Dravine of San Rafael agrees. "I adore the shows. They're always coming up with

terrific [programs], giving us something different. I know classical music might not be the first thing everyone wants to hear, but for my money it's the best show in Marin. It may not be the big time, but we've got a symphony here that's worth [traveling] to see."

"But," she adds with a laugh, "it's a good thing they're right here, because I hate to travel."

Those glowing appraisals prove that the symphony has a loyal following. However, as is the case with classical ensembles everywhere, the challenge is keeping interest alive in an art form that some people—especially those of the younger set—see as stuffy and old-fashioned. Not too many 16-year-olds have iPods loaded with Mozart and Mahler.

"There's always a struggle to keep audiences coming and to bring in younger audiences," says Skloot, who touches on the issue near the end of his film, noting that the Sacramento Symphony, for example, has folded and reincarnated several times because of funding woes. "It's so important to get young people excited about the music."

To that end, Marin Symphony offers several outreach programs, including, most prominently, the Marin Symphony Youth Orchestra, a collection of about 80 young musicians from high schools and middle schools across the county. In addition to sowing the seeds of tomorrow's symphonic players and patrons, MSYO has gained acclaim in its own right, under the baton of accomplished conductor George Thomson.

"I enjoy seeing the kids," says Dougherty. "And I look forward to seeing some of them in the [Marin Symphony] when they get a few gray hairs."

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THE WORD "SYMPHONY" is derived from ancient Greek and, roughly translated, means "sounding together." But what we now know as a symphonic orchestra—a large collection of classically trained musicians playing complex compositions on woodwind, brass, percussion and string instruments—didn't emerge fully formed until the mid-18th century.

While Mozart and Beethoven are the names most often associated with the genre-defining Classical era, the man credited as "the father of the symphony" is less well known: Joseph Haydn. With the Bach-dominated Baroque period having come to a close circa 1750, Haydn—this Austrian son of a wheelwright would eventually come to befriend and mentor Mozart—took existing musical forms and added layers of complexity and color, helping to create the first of the soaring, contrasting, multi-dimensional pieces we know and enjoy today.

Like many other artistic innovators, Haydn spent the early part of his career toiling in anonymity as a freelancer, scraping together work where he could find it. He taught music and even worked for a time serenading passersby on the street. The jobs were sporadic and unglamorous, but the young composer pressed on for the love of his art.

Some things, as they say, never change.

"I've done it all my life. I can't really see doing anything else," says violinist Shinozaki, whose husband is also a Freeway Phil musician. The couple recently had a child, adding another wrinkle to their already busy lives. But they have no plans of giving up the music.

Of course, passion and artistic purity are all well and good, but you've still got to eat. And while Freeway Phil players can and do make a living with their music—though many supplement with other gigs, mostly as youth instructors—it can be difficult.

Trombonist Bruce Chrisp fills his car with biodiesel to save money (and the environment); most others pay heavily at the pump. When you add vehicular wear and tear and factor in the hours spent traversing from job to job, wading through the serpentine gridlock of 101 and 580, you get a tough equation.

And then there's the tenuous nature of playing music at a high level and the often unseen, but nonetheless very real, physical strain involved.

During Skloot's film, bassoonist Karla Ekholm decides to take a well-earned vacation and injures her hand in a fall. With her appendage still black-and-blue and her fingers in a splint, she's already talking about getting back to playing—partly because she misses it, but also because the disability checks won't last forever and a place in the Freeway Phil doesn't come with a health plan.

Watching Ekholm gamely, but gingerly, attempt to finger her instrument, it's hard not to wince along with her. But, much like an athlete who needs to get back on the field before the game passes her by, Ekholm knows the pain is worth the gain—or rather, worth avoiding the loss of both livelihood and professional identity that would come with giving up.

Hardships aside, the feeling put forward by nearly every Freeway Phil player, even when the chips are down, is one of gratitude—both for their God-given musical gifts and for the chance to share them with anyone who will listen.

Meredith Brown, a principal French horn player with Marin Symphony, sums it up nicely: "We were talking about vacations and I said, 'God, I don't feel like I need a vacation.' I'm enjoying myself, what do I need a vacation for? This is what I'm supposed to be doing. This is what I love."

Freeway Philharmonic premieres 7pm January 24 at the Rafael Film Center and airs January 27 on KQED channel 9. For more info on the film, visit <http://www.freewayphil.com> ; for info on Marin Symphony's current season, visit <http://www.marinsymphony.org> .

Not another gifted-musician movie!

Freeway Philharmonic is, of course, not the first film to focus on classical musicians and the symphony; it's well-covered ground in Hollywood. Herewith, a far-from-comprehensive sampling of a few other celluloid examinations of the subject, from the strange to the silly to the sublime:

- After gaining prominence with his made-for-TV docudrama **Elgar** (1962), iconoclastic British director Ken Russell churned out a loose trilogy of biopics in the early- to mid-'70s focused on famous composers. **The Music Lovers** (1970) tells the story of Tchaikovsky, from tortured childhood to his death from cholera, employing sparse dialogue and instead relying heavily on music-backed psychedelic fantasy sequences and nightmarish flashbacks. **Mahler** (1974) takes us through the life and work of 19th-century composer Gustav Mahler and is also told largely in flashback, though with a slightly more traditional narrative structure. Finally, Russell unleashed **Lisztomania** (1975), centered on the life and work of Hungarian virtuoso Franz Liszt and his Romantic era contemporary Richard Wagner. The most poorly received of the three, it does have the distinction of being the only film ever to feature Ringo Starr as the Pope.
- Milos Forman's **Amadeus** (1984) earned a Best Picture Oscar and Best Actor nominations for both its lead actors, including a win for F. Murray Abraham as Salieri, the coldly proficient yin to Mozart's (Tom Hulce doing his best work outside of *Animal House*) flamboyant boy-genius yang. Historical inaccuracies—or creative liberties, depending on your point of view—led to a bit of backlash, but the film still stands as the undisputed champ of composer biopics.
- Just as Beethoven followed Mozart, **Immortal Beloved** (1994) followed *Amadeus*. Gary Oldman plays the man of the hour, whose life is told through the relationships he had with various and sundry women—one of whom is the bearer of the titular moniker, which comes from a mysterious letter in the composer's hand that was discovered after his death in 1827. Director Bernard Rose controversially claimed to have uncovered the true identity of the mystery woman, an assertion dismissed by many scholars.
- The old "troubled teacher wins over a collection of skeptical multiethnic students while learning a valuable lesson about him/herself" plot has been done to the point of self-parody. And while **Mr. Holland's Opus** (1995) falls back on more than a few predictable narrative cliches, it's got enough heart and solid performances (as the composer-turned-high school music teacher Richard Dreyfuss finally seems like more than "that guy from *Jaws*") to win over folks who don't mind a little schmaltz.
- **Shine** (1996), which premiered at the Mill Valley Film Festival, earned seven Academy Award nominations and won star Geoffrey Rush a Best Actor trophy for his embodiment of mentally unstable Australian concert pianist David Helfgott. Acclaim gave way to controversy when Helfgott's sister disputed the accuracy of the film, especially the portrayal of father Peter Helfgott as an abusive tyrant.
- **Hilary and Jackie** (1998) also earned both critical praise—and Oscar noms for stars Emily Watson and Rachel Griffiths—and subsequent backlash. Praise for its touching portrait of the du Pre sisters, one of whom, Jacqueline, was a renowned cellist who was afflicted with multiple sclerosis; and backlash for, once again, perceived inaccuracies.

A brief history of the symphony

1555 Andrea Amati constructs first known four-stringed violin

1732 Joseph Haydn, "the father of the symphony," born

1750 J.S. Bach dies; Classical era begins

1756 W.A. Mozart born

1764 Mozart writes first symphony

1770 Ludwig von Beethoven born

1781 Mozart and Haydn meet in Vienna, form lasting friendship

1783 Beethoven publishes first works

1787 Mozart and Beethoven meet in Vienna, Mozart gives lessons

1791 Mozart dies

1798 Beethoven begins to go deaf

1809 Haydn dies

1820 Romantic era begins

1824 Beethoven completes Ninth Symphony

1827 Beethoven dies

1833 Johannes Brahms born

1874 Arnold Schoenberg born

1892 Pytor Ilyich Tchaikovsky completes music for *The Nutcracker*

1900 Modernist era begins

1907 Gustav Mahler publishes the symphony after his eighth, but fearing the "curse of the ninth," doesn't number it

1913 Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* causes rioting at a Paris theater

1924 George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* completed

1942 Aaron Copland's Fanfare for the Common Man first performed

1952 Marin Symphony stages first concert

2005 Phillip Glass's Symphony No. 8 premieres in New York

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