

Terrible way to relearn music

TERRI RICHARDSON | The Journal Gazette

One by one, musicians slowly start to file into the gym of First Missionary Church.

They each put their items in one of several chairs that are spaced 6 feet apart. After settling in, the musicians begin to tune their instruments. It sounds and looks similar to watching a professional orchestra prepare for a rehearsal.

All the violas are sitting in one area, the violins in another and the cellos in yet another. However, these players are not professionals.

In fact, they'll be the first to tell you that they are terrible, making them perfect members for the Fort Wayne Terrible Orchestra. But, of course, they really aren't terrible. Even though some of them haven't played their instrument in more than 30 years, they sound really good.

The Terrible Orchestra was created to be a safe, nonjudgmental place for a person who hasn't played their instrument in a while and they just want to play, says founder Debra Graham.

And for those looking to join, it appears the motto here is:

"You can be terrible if you want to," Graham says.

Filling a need

There are 12 people who have come to rehearse on a snowy, cold night in January. It's the second week of the orchestra, which meets each Monday for 10 weeks.

The group members range in age from their 30s to 80s. However, many of them have not been coming because of COVID-19 concerns. In addition, the orchestra is not up to full capacity as only the strings are meeting to rehearse for virus safety precautions.

Graham says that brass and other wind instruments can be a problem when it comes to the virus, so she decided to only have the strings meet right now.

The players come from all walks of life: counselor, nurse, engineer, medical professionals. But all of them have come here for the opportunity to pick back up the beloved instrument they put aside all those years ago and perform.

The group is working on a Mozart piece. "They've come a long way," Graham says. "They're serious about it."

And so is Graham.

Graham started the orchestra a few years ago after being

inspired by the Scottish group The Really Terrible Orchestra. She says the premise of the group is, "We want to play our instruments together, but yeah, it would be really terrible."

She contacted the Taco (Terrible Adult Chamber Orchestra) Orchestra in Chicago to get tips on how to begin.

Graham, who plays the viola with the Fort Wayne Philharmonic, says she loves to teach string and conduct. That's why she decided to start a similar terrible orchestra in Fort Wayne. "It was a need that wasn't being filled," Graham says of the group.

Return to music

Graham is standing on a platform, baton in hand, conducting the orchestra. They are working on a particular section of music that Graham wants to be livelier.

Graham gives the musicians an idea of how the music should sound. "Bom, bom, bom, bom," she says with inflection in her voice on each "bom" that needs to go up or down a note.

They repeat the music. "That was great," she says.

On another part, she tells the group, "That needs to be an explosion. Can you give me like Hollywood? Boom!"

"Let's rock 'n' roll, let's rock 'n' roll, OK?"

The musicians once again work on the part. There are off-notes here and there, but the group is coming together nicely.

Dana Garver has been playing with the group a year. The 51-year-old cello player from Harlan began playing in elementary school then through college.

Although she hadn't played but maybe once a year since she's been out of college, Garver says she was able to catch back on to the instrument pretty quickly.

This is Colleen Katt's third year with the orchestra. She has been with the orchestra since its beginning.

However, it had been 30 years since the 54-year-old played her violin before joining.

She also began playing in elementary school, starting in fourth grade, and played through her second year of college. Then she had kids and life began and the instrument took a back seat.

"She says it was a struggle when she first started back. "It took some practice," she says.

But that's why the musicians are here on this Monday night – to practice.

Graham is not making a ton of money off the orchestra. She only charges \$60 for the 10-week sessions. However, what she gets out of it is a lot more than dollars.

“The most enjoyable ... is when they talk to each other,” Graham says. She adds that playing an instrument – especially in a group – is really good for mental health.

When the 10 weeks are over, they hope to give a small concert for their friends and family. First, however, they have to learn the Mozart piece.

But Graham doesn't seem too worried.

She says the group gets better every time it plays.

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