

MEET A MUSICIAN

BETH LUNSFORD

Home Sweet Home with the Piccolo

“I never thought such a tiny instrument could cover nearly 200 musicians and singers!” Elizabeth (Beth) Lunsford recalls a conductor remarking during a rehearsal of Verdi’s Requiem years ago. Indeed, the piccolo — the smallest instrument in the orchestra — has a sound that belies its diminutive size. Beth, who has played flute and Principal Piccolo with the North Carolina Symphony for 30 years, describes the instrument as “cutting through like a knife.” But her particular sound takes some of the edge off — which is exactly why the piccolo is such a natural fit for her.

Most flutists have experimented a bit with the piccolo at some point. (“It’s the cool new thing to try in middle school,” Beth laughs.) As a student at the New England Conservatory in Boston, Beth remembers seeing posted assignments for the next orchestra concert and finding that she would be playing piccolo in Bartók’s Concerto for Orchestra. “That’s a very scary piece to start out with; it requires some tricks of the trade,” Beth says. But with a few lessons, she pulled it off well — and she went on to gain special recognition for a few more piccolo assignments throughout her undergraduate studies.

In graduate school at Duquesne University, her primary focus was still the flute, but during her first professional positions with the Charleston Symphony Orchestra and Virginia Symphony Orchestra, she gravitated more and more toward the piccolo. When she arrived at the North Carolina Symphony in the 1988/89 season, the smaller instrument — which is made of wood instead of metal and plays an octave higher than the flute — had become her home base.

“I think my flute sound was naturally made to switch over to the piccolo,” Beth says. “I had a teacher who used to say that I have a sweet sound — and one of the things that can be tricky to do on a piccolo is to get a sound that isn’t harsh or airy. The color of my sound transferred well to piccolo and that’s the reason my career went the way it did.” (Beth’s early start with the flute was similarly serendipitous: She showed a strong interest in music from a young age but wasn’t sure which instrument to pick when it came time to take lessons in school. Her mother suggested the flute, since it would be easy to carry on the school bus, and Beth adored the instrument immediately.)



The NCS flute section (pictured at rehearsal for the Symphony’s concert at The Kennedy Center last spring) has been performing together for 30 years. Beth (left) considers the piccolo her “home instrument.”

But being a natural fit does not make the piccolo easy. Switching between the flute and piccolo within the same piece, as she sometimes has to, can be nothing short of a gymnastic feat, considering the difference in air speed and pressure required by the two instruments. The sheer dynamic of the instrument creates its own set of issues: Beth would be deafened without earplugs (hers are custom molded to her ears) and she has to be sure to warm up in private as to not deafen others; she can be found in the stairwell before performances at Raleigh’s Meymandi Concert Hall. “My hope is to someday have a plaque installed in the stairwell when I retire: ‘Beth Lunsford warmed up here!’” she jokes.

The biggest challenge in the piccolo world, though, is intonation. “As you get higher and higher in pitch, there’s less room for error,” Beth explains. “And, as you get higher in the registers, your ear is not as reliable. You have to rely more on the feeling of whether it’s sitting into the sound that’s around it.”

Luckily, there is comfort in the fact that Beth and those sitting closest to her — Principal Flute Anne Whaley Laney and flutist Mary Boone — have all been playing together for three decades. “That working relationship is really foundational to me,” Beth says. “It really matters that you know how to work together with the people you’re playing with. You know what to expect and it becomes very tight.”

And, of course, there are those inside jokes and unforgettable memories that come with such a long working relationship — like the time the three flutists heard the ticking of a metronome gone rogue just moments before the start of a concert. They all went tearing through their bags and instrument cases in a panic and breathed a collective sigh of relief as they found the culprit just seconds before Music Director Grant Llewellyn walked out on stage.

Off of the stage, Beth is an avid reader and gardener, is passionate about volunteering for voter registration events, and travels often with her family (her husband is a bassoonist-turned-tax-accountant, her elder daughter is a bassoonist who now works on staff with the Utah Symphony, and her younger daughter is a student at the University of Denver). Some of her favorite travel destinations have been Austria, New Zealand, Fiji, Costa Rica, and Peru; next up is a trip to Portugal this summer.

But each time, she comes back to her “home instrument” and her Symphony family. “I think all the time we spend together on the road, traveling statewide, makes us very different from just about any orchestra,” Beth says. “After 30 years, I consider the Symphony to be an extended family.” 

This season, Beth is most looking forward to playing Strauss’ *Ein Heldenleben* (A Hero’s Life) on May 18-19. For details and tickets, visit ncsymphony.org or call 919.733.2750.

Beth and her family love to seek out hiking trails on their vacations. The Grand Tetons National Park in Wyoming was a recent favorite.

