

Michael Cyzewski A Team Player

North Carolina Symphony Assistant Principal Clarinet Michael Cyzewski has the spirit of the City of Brotherly Love in his blood. Born and raised in Philadelphia, he is a diehard fan of the Eagles football team and Phillies baseball team. Every summer, he returns to Philadelphia and the Jersey Shore for vacation. He still brings his clarinet to the same Philadelphia repairman who has cared for his instrument for decades. And the distinctive sound of The Philadelphia Orchestra's clarinet section has been inspirational throughout his career.

"It's a beautiful, singing sound — vocal and almost flute-like, with lots of overtones," Mike explains. "I learned it from my teacher [Joseph Gigliotti at Temple University] and it's a tradition I want to keep alive. That's what I hope I bring to the North Carolina Symphony."

North Carolina has been home for Mike since he arrived at NCS 46 years ago, and he is tireless in honing that singing sound — as well as in his pursuit of excellence in every aspect of his artistry. "I'm really intentional about how I approach every piece," he says. "I'm trying to get better all the time." To that end, he puts in at least two hours of practice every day, and he had been taking summer lessons with Donald Montanaro — a former Philadelphia Orchestra musician and teacher at the Curtis Institute of Mu-

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sic — up until Montanaro's passing in 2016. Mike has "a whole anthem of notes" from those lessons that he continues to reference.

Truly a life-long learner, Mike's path in music began in the Philadelphia public school system in 4th grade. His first teacher was "an old Italian clarinet master who would bang on the stand," he recalls. "He had a very strict way of going about things — I have him to thank for that." That tradition has come full circle, as Mike now pushes for the very best from his studio of private students and from the clarinetists he coaches at the Triangle Youth Philharmonic (without as much banging on stands!).

His own youth orchestra experience, with an all-city group in Philadelphia, was life-changing. "That's when I fell in love with the symphony — I felt the passion and power and color of an orchestra for the first time," he



Mike has passed on his love of the Philadelphia Eagles to his whole family.

says. "We would be coached by members of The Philadelphia Orchestra. At the time, I probably didn't know how special that was, but now I understand!"

Mike graduated from Temple at the time of the Vietnam War draft and felt fortunate to win a position with the United States Army Band. He performed with the band for three years while also working on his master's degree from Catholic University. His schedule in the service afforded him plenty of time to practice — and so, when a few openings came up with NCS, including clarinet, he was ready. "A bunch of us from the service band piled into a couple cars and drove down," Mike remembers. He won the audition; it was 1973.

Mike notes that today, many new musicians come to NCS already knowing other members of the Symphony, having gone to school together or having played together in other orchestras. But when Mike joined — in the days when NCS's concert season was much shorter and its administrative offices were in two trailers in Chapel Hill — that was not the case. "I didn't know *an-y-one*," he emphasizes.

That soon changed — time spent on the road for statewide concerts lent itself to fast friendships and Mike found himself looking forward to getting back on the bus with his colleagues whenever he returned to Raleigh from a tour. It also wasn't long before he met the woman who would become his wife, at Mitch's Tavern on Hillsborough Street.

Mike and Judie have been married 31 years and have three grown children, Michael, Patrick, and Victoria. Not surprisingly, the entire Cyzewski family cheers on Philadelphia (and locally, Duke basketball and the Durham Bulls).

Mike makes sure to share the brotherly love of Philadelphia with his musical "team," as well: When the Eagles made the championship last year, he invited the entire orchestra to his Super Bowl party. He had authentic Philly soft pretzels shipped to Raleigh, cooked up cheesesteaks, and even taught everyone how to place their orders using the true Philly lingo ("cheesesteak wit' 'rooms' means "with onions and mushrooms," which is how Mike likes his).

From sharing his lyrical clarinet sound to sharing his recipe for the perfect cheesesteak, NCS is lucky that Mike has been bringing the best of Philly to North Carolina for nearly five decades. 

This season, Mike is most looking forward to playing Strauss' *Don Quixote* on April 5-6. For details and tickets, visit ncsymphony.org or call 919.733.2750.

Mike gave his goddaughter's son a clarinet lesson while on vacation in Avalon, New Jersey, last summer.

