

Weekly

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NOT PERFECT? NO PROBLEM

MEET TACO: THE TERRIBLY FUN,
LOW-STRESS, NO-PRESSURE ORCHESTRA

STORY BY KARLA KANE | PHOTOS BY VERONICA WEBER

At a recent meeting of the Terrible Adult Chamber Orchestra (TACO), after musicians found their seating sections, chit-chatted and tuned up, the group launched into its first piece. The melody was recognizable — Mozart’s “Marriage of Figaro” — albeit at a slower pace than the brisk tempo with which listeners may be more familiar.

“Let’s do it a little faster?” conductor Cathy Humphers Smith asked the group, which reacted with hesitation and some nervous laughter. “Let’s do it again, for fun, at the same tempo?” she countered. After another, somewhat smoother time playing through, Humphers Smith beamed at her ensemble. “Give yourself a hand, that was beautiful.”

TACO’s mission is to give people of all skill levels the chance to share a love of playing classical music in an enjoyable, inclusive environment without the pressure to perform, be perfect, or even practice regularly. It’s a matter of valuing process over product, Humphers Smith said, “and the process is joyful.”

As the group, which meets at the Los Altos Youth Center, carried on through its February repertoire, a violinist interjected, “I’m not very good,” to which Humphers Smith offered a reassuring reply: “Then you’re right where you need to be, with us!”

TACO, its website states, is for “non-perfectionists who want to laugh together.” Inspired by Scotland’s “Really Terrible Orchestra,” Humphers Smith said that people who may feel intimidated by the idea of playing in an



Cathy Humphers Smith leads the Terrible Adult Chamber Orchestra (TACO) through a tribute to composer John Williams at the group’s February meeting.

orchestral group find the humorous name welcoming.

“The ‘terrible’ word really clicked. Some people don’t get the humor of it at first, and they’re initially offended. ‘Well of course you’re not terrible, you’re terrific,’” she said. “But by calling it ‘terrible,’ it makes people feel welcome and invited, like it’s possible.” “TACO” was chosen as the official acronym because it “seemed catchy and fun,” she said. “Hey, it’s California; we like Mexican food.”

On the last Sunday of each month (September-June), around 60 to 70 folks from TACO’s nearly 500-strong membership list turn up at the Los Altos Youth Center, instruments and music stands in hand, to sight-read and play from 2 to 5 p.m., with a break to socialize and snack midway through. The group’s been thriving since it was founded about seven years ago, quickly outgrowing its original headquarters in Humphers Smith’s Los Altos living room.

“My husband and I had been talking about ways to make music accessible. We both had a lot of experience in different musical settings and we wanted to have a place where classical music could also be a social thing, when you just sit around and play,” she said. After a six-month trial period at her home, Humphers Smith sought out a larger venue and more structure to help manage the quickly expanding program.

“By word of mouth, it started growing, and we realized people really like getting together once a month to sight read music,” she said. By registering TACO as an official class with the Los Altos Recreation Department, the group is able to use the city’s youth-center space, and TACO is now a nonprofit under the fiscal sponsorship of the Los Altos Community Foundation, which provides not only funding but also oversight of its \$5,000 annual budget. Membership dues are \$10 per monthly session or \$25 for three sessions, and members are also asked to take turns bringing an appetizer to share. Volunteers (often family members of the musicians) help with registration and setting up.

Flutist Joan Segall of Palo Alto has been a part of TACO since the beginning and is currently on its board of directors. Segall, like many TACO members, played music growing up, then put her instruments away when the responsibilities of adulthood took over. TACO has given her a chance to rediscover the joys of music.

“What I love is, it gives a place for those of us who are not professional to play without any pressure,” she said. “It’s fun and relaxed; there’s no audition. I love that it’s people from age 18 to 90. It’s just a total treat.”

Some people come faithfully each month; others, only occasionally. And while most live locally, TACO draws members from far and wide. One oboe player

lives in Japan but plays with the group when he’s in the area on business. A string player who lives in the Netherlands joins in when he’s visiting his daughter.

“That’s kind of the fun of it, that it can be a different group each time,” Humphers Smith said.

She’s amassed a huge library of sheet music and puts together a program of six to eight pieces per month (members can access the music ahead of time but are not obligated to), adding up to 60-70 pieces a year (considerably more than most performance orchestras, which play around 18 pieces per year). Most are arrangements aimed at musicians on a student level. Humphers Smith said she aims for variety in style as well as difficulty. She often starts off with something baroque, then tries something symphonic, then moves on to something from a musical or an arrangement of a pop song. At the February gathering, in addition to the Mozart piece, the TACO players delved into the theme song to “Game of Thrones” and a very challenging medley of themes by John Williams, among others.

Because attendance varies from session to session, “it’s always totally unbalanced, and that’s OK,” Humphers Smith said, explaining that most orchestras have space for only a few of each instrument. With TACO, “there’s no one saying, ‘this is written for two flutes and two this and that.’ I’m not going to exclude anybody.” At most TACO gatherings, flutes are prevalent while violinists, for example, are rarer.

“What I’m noticing today is, we don’t have any percussion,” she said at the February gathering. “All the percussion instruments are back there. If anyone wants to, you are welcome to give it a try, because it’s fun.” Two violinists eventually did.

Scott King, who plays the double bass, called himself a “total newbie musician” who picked



Kerstin Karlsson, center, on violin, says TACO gatherings are one of the few places she’s comfortable playing when she’s “feeling rusty.”

up the bass a few years ago after falling in love with jazz. He now leads a jazz quintet, but is finding TACO a welcoming place to better his sight-reading skills and gain a foundation in classical music. "These guys are fantastic; we have the same mindset. They love music and they don't mind a few mistakes," he said.

Sight-reading unfamiliar pieces of music (rather than rehearsing or memorizing in order to perfect

and perform), like translating a foreign language, provides a specific type of mental exercise, Humphers Smith said. "Sight-reading orchestral music is something you can only do with a lot of people playing a lot of instruments in a big space. It's a hard, challenging mind and body game, satisfying when it all comes together, and very gratifying when you've stayed in the game! It is a practice in mindfulness followed by exhilaration," she wrote on TACO's blog.

"We're harder on ourselves (as adults). We know what the professional music sounds like; we're not patient with ourselves," she said. But "there's a real benefit to playing the music for one's mental health."

Getting a chance to try out different instruments and styles, as well as practice sight-reading, socialize with like-minded folks and play without performance anxiety are some of the many reasons members are attracted to TACO.

"There are people who play with us who have played in other groups and stopped for health problems," Humphers Smith said. "(People) contact me and say things like, 'I haven't practiced

in 40 years; I don't know if I can read music anymore; I don't know if I'm good enough; I don't know if I'll bring you down.' I'm like, 'I'm not judging; this is all positive. If the best thing you can do is follow along and see where we are and hit the first note of each measure, that's great.'"

Humphers Smith has the gentle, supportive manner one might look for in a teacher or therapist, so it's not surprising to learn she

has considerable experience as both.

Growing up, she sang in choruses and played piano, and in college was a music major with plans to work in music education, until anxiety over having to perform a senior recital led her to change course. She embarked on a career in clinical social work. When her children reached elementary

— Joan Segall,
board member, TACO

school, she found her way back into music education by becoming a volunteer classroom docent with the nonprofit Music for Minors. She eventually took a job as Music for Minor's program director but missed working with people hands-on. She then worked for 10 years directing children's choruses, in addition to working with the San Jose Peace Chorale (now South Bay Song Center). As a pianist, she's also played as an accompanist for school productions, weddings and other events. "I'm not a great pianist but I'm a functional pianist, and I like sharing," she said.

Leading an orchestra is a complicated job, and Humphers Smith has worked hard to hone her conducting skills, taking courses at San Jose State University in choral and orchestral conducting. While someone playing an instrument



Emily Kinney plays her trombone (a purple plastic model made by pBone) at the most recent gathering of TACO. The group meets the last Sunday of the month at the Los Altos Youth Center.

follows the sheet music by reading the notes of his or her instrument's part, the conductor must follow along with all the different sections at once. "You have to get used to reading all that. You have to learn how to use your hands to communicate your style, emotion and feeling, and you have to keep the tempo," she said. "There's a lot to learn and a lot to practice to be able to keep everybody together. It's a fun challenge." She also brings in guest conductors from time to time.

While TACO is not intended to be a performance orchestra, occasionally, the group does share its sound in public, including at outdoor summer concerts during downtown Los Altos' First Friday events and a holiday community sing-along.

"I realized that when opportunities come up to share our music we can do it and it doesn't have to be mandatory — it's an option," Humphers Smith said. Family

and friends are always welcome to drop by and listen during the regularly monthly gatherings, she added. TACO is, by design, meant for adults, but Humphers Smith said there has been talk of trying a "shrimp TACO" or "taquito" session at which children and adults could play together.

At the February meeting, a few kids tapped on iPads on the sidelines and clarinetist Helen Morris' husband dropped by while taking their puppy for a walk. Morris, who's originally from Manchester, England, has been playing with TACO for about two years as a way to fit music back into her busy lifestyle. "I hadn't played for years and I wanted to start again," she said. "It's low stress and it's a community thing, a social thing, too."

Such comments, if you'll pardon the pun, are music to Humphers Smith's ears.

"You can make music in a way that makes you tense, anxious,

perfectionistic, so self-conscious and self-critical," she said, "or you can do it in a way that's emotionally healthy ... that's kind of the goal." ■

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TACO meets the last Sunday of the month at the Los Altos Youth Center. For more information, go to tacosv.com.

About the cover: At top: TACO players react to their rendition of "Star Wars." Below left: Violist Elaine Miller chuckles after the group's first attempt to master the end of the "Star Wars" theme. Bottom right: Conductor Cathy Humphers Smith leads the group with gentle encouragement and plenty of humor. Photos by Veronica Weber.



TACO members, from left, Andrew Large on trumpet, John Tseng on trumpet, Tim Nguyen on tenor saxophone and Bob Crow on baritone saxophone share smiles as they study their sheet music.



Alison Kline, left, and daughter Katherine Kline laugh as they give percussion a try during an especially difficult piece of music.