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# SANDPOINT

M A G A Z I N E



## Lake Pend Oreille

A Guide to Idaho's Most Magnificent Lake



# Gunther Schuller

*Twelve good questions with the maestro of The Festival at Sandpoint*

**T**he Festival at Sandpoint was barely two years old in 1985 when its founders went looking for a musical director to take the reins of the fledgling event. Although it was originally instituted to simply provide a summer concert series for the area, Festival organizers wanted an artistic visionary who could map out an ambitious future.

They found one in Gunther Schuller, a composer, conductor and educator of international stature who has helped the event blossom from a small-town concert series into a regionally heralded two-week music festival. This August the Festival will incorporate eight mainstage concerts featuring classical symphony performances in addition to pop, country, rock and jazz shows. There will also be three weeks of workshops for young musicians.

Born in New York in 1925, Schuller's career started at age 16, when he played in the New York Philharmonic under Arturo Toscanini. Eighteen years later, after playing with many distinguished symphonies, he decided to devote full time to composing.

Since then orchestras around the world have commissioned Schuller to create more than 130 works, ranging from opera and orchestral pieces to chamber music and jazz. As a conductor, he regularly leads the most famous symphony orchestras in Europe and the U.S. He also holds honorary degrees from six colleges, a host of fellowships, has authored three books and has his own publishing and recording companies, which are dedicated to furthering contemporary music.

This spring Sandpoint Magazine asked writer David Gunter to interview Schuller — not an easy task, as it turned out. Gunter tracked Schuller from Boston to New York to Seattle as he lectured and conducted coast-to-coast — “a typical Schuller week,” the maestro said.



**Q. What was it about The Festival at Sandpoint that captured your attention?**

A. For 22 years, I had been at Tanglewood, the most famous of the summer festivals, and was just retiring from that when by sheer coincidence I was approached by some folks from Sandpoint about this festival. I told them I'd be interested on one condition: that it be not just a festival where we'd give some concerts and that's the end of it, but there would have to be a training center, a school. I warned them to think real hard, because a training center is a deficit-making operation. There's no way a school like that can make money or even pay for itself. They thought about it a couple of months and said, 'Yeah, that's what we'd like to do.'

**Other than the chance to study with some huge names, is there a musical “agenda” behind the training program?**

Well, certainly. The training center com-

ponents are part of the concept of creating a total musician. I have conducting, I have chamber music, a jazz department and a composition department. What might help towards making the total musician is that all the departments interact with each other. What I mean by total musician is not someone who is a perfect technical musician, but someone who's very broad-ranging in their musical abilities and stylistic versatility. It's someone who can perform, or at least appreciate, every kind of good music.

**Do you have any new frontiers or other programs you'd like to see included in the future?**

Well, I would like to get into vocal music, and in the long distance, perhaps even opera. But opera is such an expensive animal. Every time you add a new component, it loses more money. So you have to think very carefully about adding these things. Eventually, I would like to



## FESTIVAL AT SANDPOINT SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

**T**HE FESTIVAL AT SANDPOINT attracts both world-renowned musicians and aspiring students. Mainstage performances stretch from August 1-11 with performances of classical, pop, country, rock and jazz music. For full schedule and tickets contact The Festival at Sandpoint, 205 First Avenue. (265-4554)

Also part of the Festival is the annual workshop series for students. Conducted July 28-August 18 at Schweitzer Mountain Resort, the workshops include on-mountain chamber music and concerts. Schedules will be announced.

### AUGUST MAINSTAGE PERFORMANCES

- 1 Pop/Country or Rock concert, 8 p.m.
- 2-3 Spokane Symphony Orchestra, Gunther Schuller conducting, 8 p.m. With guest soloist pianist Robert Taub.
- 4 Children's Concert, 7 p.m., with other activities for children, 3-7 p.m.
- 8 Pop/Country or Rock concert, 8 p.m.
- 9 Spokane Symphony Orchestra, Gunther Schuller conducting, 8 p.m. Featuring guest soloists PRO ARTE String Quartet from Wisconsin.
- 10 Jazz by singer Joe Williams, 8 p.m.
- 11 Spokane Symphony Orchestra, Young Conductors at the helm, 8 p.m.

get back to an orchestral training program as we had at Tanglewood. Sometime very soon, I'd also like to start a high school camp. It's at that age that the training is the most needed.

### Is the casual atmosphere of the Festival an exception, or has classical music stepped out to meet the masses?

It's not an exception at all, anymore. It hasn't been for 40 years. Tanglewood, for example, started in 1940 and ever since then people have been sitting out on the lawn listening to the concerts and having their blankets and picnic baskets and God knows what. I think it's terrific, but it's not anything we invented in Sandpoint. It did, however, happen very naturally there, because Sandpoint is full of vacationers during the summer, so they come to a concert to have a nice evening of music and then they go back to their fishing and mountain climbing.

### You once wrote that 95 percent of the American public had never set foot in a symphony hall. Is this a way to make inroads to that potential audience?

I suppose it is; one hopes that it achieves that. By the way, that statistic is still the same or possibly worse, and that's simply because of the very destructive influence of network television. There's never

a symphony orchestra, there's no jazz, no Duke Ellington, no Louis Armstrong, no Beethoven, no Gunther Schuller, no nothing. Just Madonna and Bruce Springsteen or whoever the current rage is. All of us in classical music try to reach out into this vast audience which doesn't even know we exist, and it's like a tiny little drop on a huge, hot stone.

### How do you choose the music for the Festival symphony concerts?

My programs, no matter where I go — if I'm conducting the Berlin Philharmonic or in Sandpoint or the Chicago Symphony — I always make programs in which there is one standard, very familiar piece and also a lesser known piece. And there almost always is some contemporary piece, which is tantamount to saying unknown. I do it everywhere, and I believe it's a wonderful balance because it intrigues and challenges the audience.

### You don't make any bones about the idea that there is, in fact, good and bad music. Is there a qualitative benchmark for what you consider to be good?

Sure. It has to be creative, it has to be original in a profound, serious way. Something that has not been done before and is created to inspire and to add something significant to the musical literature.

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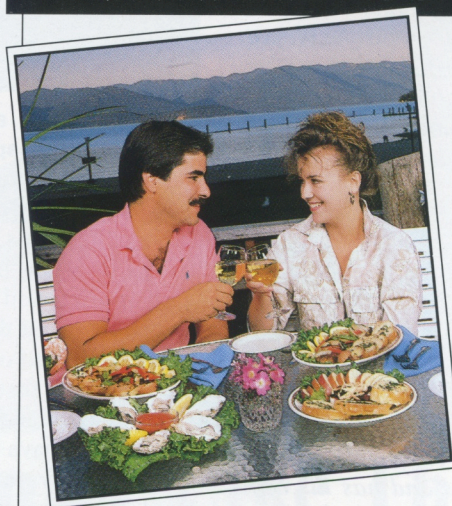


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Commercial music, by definition, does not do that. It wants to make money. And the only way it can make really serious money is by not being creative. The minute you're too creative, you can not get a large audience. That's a moral, aesthetic, philosophical choice one has to make.

**Let's wrangle with that one a bit more. You were impressed by the Festival at Sandpoint performances of Doc Watson playing old bluegrass tunes and Michael Martin Murphy doing traditional cowboy songs. Where does originality or adding to the literature come in there?**

Well, there you cannot speak of total originality, because they're recreating previously existing material. But their originality does manifest itself in the particular treatment with which they present that material. In my view, both of those people are artists who add a creative quality in their interpretation and who do it at such a consummate technical level that it becomes an art form.

**You've been called a musical purist. What is it that taints the quality of music?**

Creating music with a mass market in mind. Lately, many musics are being promoted and hyped and sold almost like

deodorant or soap on television. If you approach it that way, the purity of the original product which you're selling is going to be tainted or affected, there's no question about it. For the high arts, there's always been a smaller number of appreciative people. If you want to reach out to that mass market with the intention of making the money it can bring you, then you've got to lower your product to the lowest common denominator of accessibility, and that's where the art goes out of it.

**But you did reach a mass audience in the 1970s when you resurrected Scott Joplin's "Red Back Book." In fact, you won a Grammy. Was the ragtime revival that kicked off a fluke of timing?**

Absolutely. No one — least of all me, who started it all — had any idea that any of this would happen. I approached this in a totally uncommercial way. I knew ragtime was great music that had languished in oblivion; no one had paid any attention to it. We put it on in some concerts at the New England Conservatory, right along with classical music. Everybody was amazed. They said, 'Wow, where did you find this music?' Who is this guy, Scott Joplin?' A tape of the concerts went around and before I

knew it I was talking to record companies. And the rest is history. My intention was simply to make my students and faculty at the conservatory aware of this remarkable musical tradition. The fact that it turned into a commercial success was a complete accident. Of course, a very nice one.

**Do you think there might be other lost treasures out there waiting to be jumped on by a larger, appreciative audience?**

I don't think there's anything of that magnitude lying around. There are certainly hundreds, if not thousands, of individual works which are neglected and forgotten and not performed, but whether they would turn into a commercial success, I doubt very much.

**Last question. I understand you create something of an uproar in your home kitchen when you make potato pancakes. Any chance The Festival at Sandpoint audiences will have a chance to see you in action that way?**

*Laughs.* Well, I can't produce those on a mass scale. They are very good, though, I'll vouch for that. It's something my mother taught me when I was a kid, a popular German/Jewish dish. *Laughs.* Maybe some day we'll try something like that. ■



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