



UCI orchestra conductor's firm hand inspires passionate performances and insightful careers

Stephen Tucker vividly remembers the day his choice of a musical career finally won acceptance from his mother. She had encouraged each of her six children to learn instruments and appreciate music in their native Jamaica, but worried about them making the huge leap from prodigious talent to sustainable career.

"We had a constant battle, until I was hired to orchestrate and conduct a recording in Texas," Tucker says. "When I returned with an extremely large sum of money for only three weeks' work, I handed it to my mother and told her to use it to pay bills.

"The shock on her face is still very clear today," he recalls. "She was amazed that anyone could make that

much money for what seemed like little work, and she never again questioned my decision to embark on a career in music."

EYEING THE PRIZE

For UCI's maestro – conductor of the UCI Symphony Orchestra and assistant professor in the music department of the Claire Trevor School of the Arts – practical considerations are a constant earthy backbeat to the sublime joys of music.

"I tell each student who enters my orchestra that success in a musical career can be achieved only with careful, disciplined preparation," he says.

Maestro Stephen Tucker has a reputation for telling students what they need – if not always what they want – to hear.





Perhaps because of that credo, it has been a long time since Tucker has had to worry about the trajectory of his career. He's in great demand as a concert pianist, arranger, producer, teacher and, above all, conductor. Recruited from UCLA in 2000, he has led the growing UCI orchestra while maintaining a busy schedule of teaching, performing and guest conducting for symphonies around the world.

Tucker and his twin brother, Paul, began their study of music while playing piano and organ for their church in Jamaica. Their musical education continued through the Royal Schools of Music program and later at the Jamaica School of Music, where they studied under Kaestner

Robertson, who became a guiding mentor. As an organ and piano major, Stephen again studied under Robertson at Atlantic Union College in Massachusetts.

While Paul's career path veered into the corporate world as a commercial pilot and flight instructor, eventually he returned to a life in music and now conducts a choral ensemble in the Dallas area.

Stephen's growing love of conducting led to further studies at the International Institute of Symphonic Conducting, the Vienna Conservatory and UCLA, where professor and orchestra conductor Jon Robertson had a profound impact on him. Along the way, Tucker has served as music director for the Neumark Ensemble and the Southern California Young Artists Symphony, and as guest conductor of the Slovak Radio Symphony, Hungarian National Symphony and the Ukraine's Kharkov Philharmonic.

TEACHING TEAMWORK

At UCI, Tucker goes beyond teaching music to his already gifted students. He teaches humility to healthy egos and respect for the orchestral whole to talented individuals who have largely mastered their instruments in isolation, through long hours of lonely practice.

Depending on one's seat in the symphony hall, the acoustics of his approach are either brilliant, brusque, insensitive or inspiring. "Although I don't

always see myself exactly as others do, I am probably somewhere in between a softy and an ogre," he says, adding: "No, maybe I'm just an ogre."

Nohema Fernández, arts dean and a world-class musician herself, sees the purpose behind Tucker's gruff posture. "Stephen manages the difficult balance between high standards and supporting students in meeting those high standards.

"He has great dedication to students and nurturing their growth. He has a very warm personality; students really adore him, and that's wonderful to see."

Tucker insists that his musicians master not only the music, but also the context that uniquely explains the music. "Without a deep understanding of the environment in which the works were created, students simply go through the motions as trained simpletons," he contends.

One former student who has benefited from Tucker's guidance is now the orchestra's principal clarinetist. Gene Wie '01, M.F.A. '03 also performs extensively on violin, viola and saxophone. He is a staff accompanist for modern dance at UCI, and serves on the faculties of the Orange County High School of the Arts, the New California Conservatory and Arrowbear Music Camp. He also maintains a private teaching studio with more than 20 students.

Wie acknowledges that much of his career success is due to Tucker's teaching. "Some students didn't want to hear it, but he told us exactly what we needed to hear," he says.

Wie credits Tucker with nurturing Wie's own strengths as a teacher and conductor. Chief among them are respect for the orchestra, as well as the potential of every student. Tucker helped him realize that some music teachers give up too easily, cloaking their surrender in the claim a pupil has "no talent." Wie has learned that this often is just an excuse to give up on teaching.

And, as any student of Stephen Tucker will tell you, giving up – in music or life – is not a practical option.

– Charlie Dodge

More: www.today.uci.edu/tucker

