



Real Life
Robert Fulghum on birthdays
 and their best of love.
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SCENE

THE SEATTLE TIMES SECTION F MONDAY, MARCH 20, 1995

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A GERMAN OVERTURE

By MALINDA BAKOZEN
 Seattle Times music critic

He was invited to conduct Beethoven in Bach's old neighborhood — now known as the land of skinheads and a half-century of concentrated anti-American sentiment.

Paul Elliott Cobbs was about to find himself a double minority in Leipzig, in the heart of the former East Germany, where no American had conducted the Erzegebirge (Hartz Mountain District) Symphony Orchestra, and few African Americans had ever been glimpsed. Cobbs, conductor of the Everett Symphony and a teacher at the Northwest School, expected to encounter a recalcitrant orchestra, a lot of hostile stares and maybe some overt racism.

Instead, by the time Cobbs had led the last encore and headed for his plane back to Seattle, there were tears of farewell among orchestra members, a suitcase full of gifts and souvenirs for his family, and one young orchestra couple was planning to name their baby after him.

A universal language
 The story of Cobbs' visit to Germany last month demonstrates that at least some of those old clichés about music being a universal language are true. It also shows that goodwill, hard work and giving a little more than your share can reap some rich rewards.

It was almost a year ago that Cobbs received a phone call from a Swiss-born pianist named Walter Frositz, a frequent soloist in the Leipzig area. The local symphony orchestra was interested in a cultural exchange with the U.S., and Cobbs' name had been suggested as a possible guest conductor. Would he be interested, and would he be available?

"The program was set, and they wanted me to conduct



Conductor Paul-Elliott Cobbs looks strictly businesslike. Only his feet hint at an adventurous spirit: He always wears some kind of wild and crazy socks.

BETTY USHERN/SEATTLE TIMES

With a love of music and hard work, a conductor conquers years of distrust

Beethoven's Fifth." Cobbs remembers over coffee in Everett. "It takes a lot of nerve to do Beethoven's Fifth with a German orchestra."

It would be like the Germans sending a pitcher to play major-league baseball here — and not replacement baseball, either. The Germans virtually invented symphonic music (just ask them), and Beethoven is sacred. Cobbs was nervous about the program, but not so nervous that he didn't want to go.

The race factor
 The music was a professional worry. But there was also a much more personal concern. Cobbs sent in his resume, with conducting credits from

Japan and Europe. Then the orchestra management asked for photos. Did they realize he was African American? Would that make a difference?

Cobbs sent them four formal photos and waited for a response. All he received was a fax thanking him for the photos. No big deal.

"Race didn't really make a difference," he says.

"During the whole time I was there, the focus was that I was the first American to come. That was such a novelty that nothing else seemed to matter.

"I was aware there had been some skinhead activity, but I never saw anything. The orchestra members were very pro-

PLEASE SEE Cobbs ON F 2

Paul-Elliott Cobbs wins fans among his peers in Leipzig

Cobbs

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tective of me, especially one nice young couple who was expecting a baby. They wanted to make sure I was OK at all times."

When Cobbs got off the plane after 22 hours of travel from Everett, he met with Erzgebirge Symphony management in Aue, a town near Leipzig, for the lowdown on the concert situation. The news wasn't good.

"I was told the orchestra could be 'a bit difficult at times.' The immediate area was economically depressed, because when the Russians moved out they took 90 percent of the jobs with them. Audiences for the symphony concerts were supposed to be sparse and unresponsive. They warned me the audience would be out of the hall three seconds after the last chord.

"And I thought: 'Oh. OK. We'll see.'"

A "show us" atmosphere

Cobbs knew he would be tested in orchestra rehearsals. He addressed the orchestra in the German he had learned as a conducting student in Vienna. He was unfailingly polite, but didn't let deliberate mistakes, or any mistakes, pass without correction. By the second rehearsal, he was picking up the local dialect and using it in rehearsal.

closed thumb and forefinger, has a rude meaning. Cobbs was stymied by the red faces and averted eyes until a helpful orchestra member explained.

Cobbs got them to look at his face and baton, instead of the music, by joking that they already knew the music... didn't they? He placed his own music stand behind him and conducted from memory. After that, the players gave him their attention.

So did the press. Print and radio interviews were respectful, and some went well beyond that (one headline read "Star conductor from the USA"). Bulgarians and Romanians in the orchestra phoned home with news about the visiting conductor, and overtures were extended ("Can you get to Sofia for the 1996-97 season?").

Cobbs knew things were going well when a group of about 10 orchestra members locked the door at the last rehearsal.

"You can't leave," they told the conductor.

"You have to stay here with us." The concert sold out. Nervous but prepared, Cobbs led the overture. Then a very fine cello soloist, Ksenija Jankovic, scored a big success with the Elgar Concerto. The Beethoven went extremely well.

Then came the curtain calls, and a standing ovation — the first most could remember there. Cobbs and the orchestra played an encore, and after the applause continued, another encore — the last movement of the

Beethoven again.

"After the seventh curtain call, I decided to stop," Cobbs says. "I talked to the audience and told them how pleased I was, how proud of their symphony orchestra they should be. Then I wished them a good night."

Reporters followed Cobbs off-stage, asking about his warm relationship with the orchestra and his plans to return.

"To most of them, America seems like a distant planet," Cobbs says.

"When I left, some of the players thought they would never see me again. But we are making plans for my return visit. In the meantime, I am sending them catalogs of American music, all of which is completely unknown to them."

Cobbs has invited the Erzgebirge's regular conductor, Reinhardt Naumann, to conduct in Everett next year.

It can take a long time to wipe out the years of anti-American sentiment that lingered after two world wars. But sometimes, all it takes is a concert, a lot of mutual respect and the ability to appreciate Beethoven together.

"A little respect and a smile," as Cobbs puts it, "can go a long, long way."



Paul-Elliott Cobbs in his conductor's finery.

Cobbs describes the atmosphere at the first rehearsal as, "OK, Mr. American Conductor. Show us what you've got."

He responded by being very picky but very appreciative. The players applauded him warmly at rehearsal's end.

But he discovered some gestures didn't travel well. A thumbs-up sign, Cobbs' usual signal of approval, was interpreted as "play higher," so the pitch would go out of tune before Cobbs realized what was happening. Another approving gesture, the cir-