

Orchestra percussionist receives award for instrumental efforts

Tempe Symphony Orchestra principal percussionist Jim Nelson beats an impressive path.

From humble roots as a student at Indiana University to the United States Marine Band to the recording studios of Los Angeles and the theaters of New York City, Nelson has drummed his way across the United States, keeping the beat for musicals, operas, recording artists, movies, television and award shows, radio, commercials, orchestras, ballets, pop and jazz concerts and much more.

His rhythms appear on numerous television shows, including *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *The Streets of San Francisco* and the motion picture, *The Best Little Whore House in Texas*.



Jim Nelson prepares for a Tempe Symphony Orchestra performance.

"It doesn't matter what I've done, except to say I've been extremely fortunate and lucky to have had musical experiences that, as a farm boy from Iowa, I never dreamed of or even knew what the possibilities were," Nelson said.

Today, Nelson, a full-time realtor, entertains audiences throughout the Valley, working Broadway shows at ASU Gammage and as a volunteer for the Tempe Symphony Orchestra.

"I'm a member (of the orchestra) because I love to play,"

Nelson said. "All I ever wanted to do was play. After this selfish desire, I play because it allows me to give something back to the community as a player and, hopefully, as a player with some experience, be able to help other percussionists raise their own level of performance and expectations. For example, during the last two seasons we have been fortunate to have different high school seniors play with us in a setting that is above their normal high school level."

Over the past three to four years, his efforts with the orchestra have expanded to assisting with purchasing percussion instruments for the new Tempe Center for the Arts (TCA). For that, he received the city's Special Projects Volunteer of the

Year Award at the annual Volunteer Recognition luncheon in April.

"The best way to showcase the TCA theater's state-of-the-art acoustics is to have the orchestra playing the best equipment available. Jim has been instrumental in meeting that goal," Mary Fowler, city staff liaison to the symphony said.

Nelson, who displays the award in his real estate office, spent countless hours identifying more than 90 percussion instruments and related gear that are needed to adequately equip the orchestra. He then researched pricing and availability. He created a book filled with information from which the city was able to procure a wide array of instruments, including timpani, a gong, a xylophone, drum sets, a vibraphone, cymbals, wood blocks, chimes, sleigh bells and much more.

"We needed good, and hopefully long-lasting, quality instruments," Nelson said. "Not the cheapest ones, but not the absolute top of the line that major orchestras have. After much editing, and getting valuable input from other local percussionists, the choices were made. Then it was time to comparison shop for pricing on each instrument."

Nelson's efforts resulted in about a 50 percent savings to the city, and his efforts did not stop at identifying instruments. He also will inspect items once they arrive, take measurements on the larger equipment to ensure accurate sizes for protective covers and assist with inventory and storage. It is a monumental task – one that Nelson tackles with dedication.

It is the same dedication that, in September, will lead him into his 13th year as a member of Tempe's volunteer, community symphony orchestra.

"In this era of competition for an audience with electronic media, I congratulate the Tempe arts community for its non-stop support and funding," Nelson said. "The free concerts definitely make this cultural event accessible, not only for regular concert goers, but also to new listeners at a cost they can afford. And live music continues! Bravo!"



Photo by R. Skip Neeley
Jim Nelson displays his Special Projects Volunteer award.