

Ursuline seniors help LPO create 'virtual' field trip

By Beth Donze
Clarion Herald

Tourists visiting St. Louis Cathedral lingered a lot longer than usual on a recent Wednesday afternoon, kept in their pews by the soul-stirring strains of live classical music.

On Feb. 2, members of the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra – and their instruments – occupied every inch of the cathedral's sanctuary to rehearse for "Made in Louisiana," a program of classical pieces commonly heard in New Orleans' concert halls in the first half of the 19th century.

Among the listeners were 21 select Louisiana teens in the midst of a field trip that exposed them to the history of Louisiana music and the behind-the-scenes operations of a working orchestra. The day of artistic enrichment, co-sponsored by the LPO and the Historic New Orleans Collection, also gave the young people a unique opportunity to interview and film working musicians, singers, docents and historians.

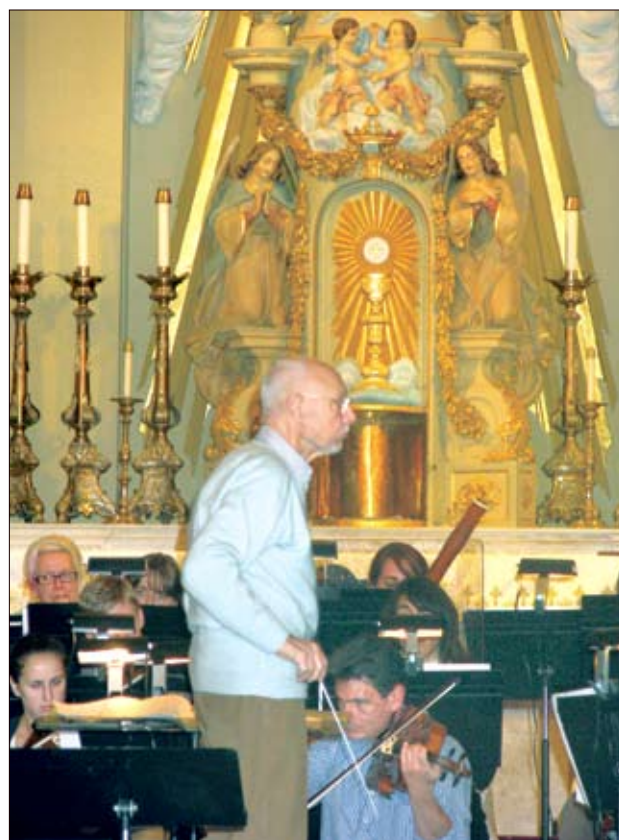
Their filmed interviews ultimately will be folded into a "virtual field trip" that will be made available to the public on the two co-sponsors' Web sites.

'Angelic' sounds

"I didn't expect the music to sound this beautiful," said Ariel Gaines, one of two participating Ursuline Academy seniors, complimenting the musicians' velvety playing and the cathedral's perfect acoustics.

"It was really different from the music I'm used to hearing on the radio," Gaines said. "Classical music has a lot of feeling to it – it has an almost angelic quality, and it has more structure to it than other types of music. You can tell how much thought was put into it."

Katharine Harris, the other participant from Ursuline and a soprano in her high school's choir, was struck by the "gorgeous" voice of LPO mezzo-soprano Katherine



Photos by Beth Donze | CLARION HERALD

Klauspeter Seibel, left, principal guest conductor for the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra's Feb. 2 concert "Made in Louisiana," leads a rehearsal in the sanctuary of St. Louis Cathedral. Listening in the pews were 21 Louisiana teens selected by the LPO and the Historic New Orleans Collection for a daylong field trip examining the state's musical legacy and the behind-the-scenes workings of a professional orchestra. Above, two of the young participants – Ursuline Academy seniors Katharine Harris (filming with a flip video camera) and Ariel Gaines – interview Katherine Rohrer, LPO mezzo-soprano. Chaperoning for the day was Ursuline faculty member Debby Wood, center, the students' advanced piano teacher.

Rohrer, who sang excerpts from two operas: Rossini's "The Barber of Seville" and Bizet's "Carmen." Although "The Barber of Seville" was originally written in Italian, field trip participants learned that the opera was translated into French for its 1823 New Orleans debut to appease the city's large French-speaking population.

"The aria (Rohrer) sang from "Carmen" was beautiful," Harris said, referring to "L'amour est un oiseau rebelle."

After the rehearsal, Gaines and Harris tracked down Rohrer to interview the singer about her musical background, taking out a camera-size "flip video" to film the proceedings. They were amazed to learn that Rohrer was born with a hearing impairment and had taught herself to sing with the aid of a spectrograph, a machine that produces a visual "thumb print" of the voice.

"The spectrograph puts the voice on a screen, so I could see what the voices of Pavarotti, Ethel Merman and Barbra Streisand looked like," Rohrer explained.

Earlier, the field trip had kicked off at the Historic New Orleans Collection's Williams Research Center, where the young people were given a lecture on Louisiana's territorial period – the short but transformational span of time from the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 to Louisiana's entry into the union in 1812.

Ursuline connections

They also took a private tour of the accompanying exhibit – "Between Colony and State" – and explored the collection's permanent exhibits, which featured a couple of objects of special interest to the Ursuline students: a painting of Our Lady of Prompt Succor presiding over the Battle of New Orleans; and a dining table once used by the Ursuline nuns, outfitted with handy built-in drawers for each diner's utensils.

Another pleasant surprise awaited the Ursuline seniors during a lecture on local musical history.

"I didn't realize that the first piece of documented music in Louisiana was written in 1757 by the Ursuline

nuns," Harris said. "They wrote a song to use in the convent to teach the girls the difference between right and wrong."

Native son a musical great

The musical history component of the field trip – and the LPO's concert – was built around the sophisticated and diverse music environment that influenced New Orleans-born Louis Moreau Gottschalk, the first American composer to win universal acclaim for his compositions.

In addition to exploring the classical musical repertoire to which Gottschalk was exposed – from his 1829 birth up until his departure for Europe in 1841 – the program made note of Gottschalk's exposure to African music and dance in Congo Square and to the city's rich cultural tapestry that gave birth to modern forms such as jazz.

"I didn't realize how much New Orleans history was relevant to U.S. history – I didn't realize the city was such an important part of a larger scheme," Gaines said.

Like Gottschalk, Gaines and Harris are classical pi-

ano players who took up their instrument from a very young age. Yet despite their exposure to the performing arts, both admitted that the concert at St. Louis Cathedral was the first LPO production they had ever attended.

"Our world is so fast-paced," Harris said, encouraging more young people to check out the LPO. "Popular music is great, but it's neat to go back and discover how rich (classical) music is, and how it's filled with so much culture and diversity and history."

"Made in Louisiana" is the fourth annual installment of the LPO-HNOC series "Musical Louisiana: America's Cultural Heritage." The series provides educational packets to more than 2,000 fifth- and eighth-grade teachers in Louisiana's public and private schools. The packets, featuring a CD, a DVD, classroom activities and lesson plans, also are distributed to members of the Louisiana Association of Symphony Orchestras in Baton Rouge, Lafayette, Lake Charles, Alexandria, Shreveport and Monroe to support educational programming.

Beth Donze can be reached at bdonze@clarionherald.org.