

Lawrence Eckerling: Music keeps pace lively for busy conductor

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His grandfather's gift of a toy piano at age 3 set Lawrence Eckerling on a wide-ranging musical career.

"I started picking out tunes by ear on that little toy piano," he said, soon moving to the real thing.



Lawrence Eckerling of Glenview is the music director of the Evanston Symphony Orchestra. | Brian O'Mahoney~for Sun-Times Media

At Park View School and Niles West High School in Morton Grove, he directed musicals, sang in the choir and played clarinet in the band.

"Whenever I did start thinking about what would be a vocation, there was only one thing that I wanted to do. It was in the global field of music, but I was going to be a choir director because that's what my (favorite) teacher at Niles West was," he said.

By the time he finished with a musical education degree from Indiana University, however, his outlook had broadened.

"All those other experiences -- musical comedy, chorus, writing arrangements for the Singing Hoosiers -- has become integrated into what I do," he said.

Fresh out of college, he started the Pro Musica Chamber Orchestra in Chicago, then became assistant conductor of the Omaha Symphony Orchestra and music director of the St. Cloud (Minnesota) Symphony Orchestra.

Around 1983, he added gigs with a wedding band he formed, now called Momentum Band. He moved to Glenview with his wife and son, and, in 2003, took the helm of the Evanston Symphony Orchestra.

Still, "I never feel like I've arrived," he said. "You're always working and striving to be better. As a performer, you're never satisfied."

That's why he chose Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, which he conducted years ago in St. Cloud, for the Evanston orchestra's March 13 performance.

"I'm doing it again now, not only because people might want to hear it again but because maybe I have something more to say about it this time after letting it incubate for all those years," he explained.

That Eckerling thrives by using every spectrum of music -- from classical to pop to jazz -- shouldn't be surprising.

"In St. Cloud, I told a board member once that I'm a Type A personality and he said to me, 'Triple A,'" he said. "I know how to turn on the intensity ... I don't do it on behalf of me. On the orchestra side, I do it on behalf of the composer that we're representing. On the Momentum Band side, I do it on behalf of our clients and reputation."

For Eckerling, the focus is never backward.

"Rather than dwelling on how great that was, I'm more concerned about when are we going to be able to do something like this again together," he said. "I'm really about looking forward."

-- Lynne Stiefel