

ROCKBRIDGE EPILOGUES

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WHEN THE ORCHESTRA CAME TO TOWN

By
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and
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BEGINNING in the mid-1940s — and for 48 years thereafter — world-class artists performed in the small college town of Lexington, population 6,000, in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. The Vienna Boys Choir sang, José Greco and his company danced, Dizzy Gillespie played his trumpet, and, year after year, the National Symphony Orchestra came to town.

These renowned artists played in spaces not built or intended for performances. They produced great art in the Lexington High School gymnasium-auditorium, Washington and Lee's University Chapel, Virginia Military Institute's Memorial Hall and on the dirt floor of the VMI Field House.

Early on, the performers traveled to Lynchburg by train and were met and brought to Lexington in automobiles driven by a rotating cast of community volunteers. The Joffrey Ballet arrived from New York in a station wagon loaded with dancers and a U-Haul trailer

overflowing with costumes. The National Symphony's musicians and their instruments came by bus on a long trip from Washington, D.C., before the interstate highway was built.

Their performances were sponsored by the Rockbridge Concert-Theater Series (RCTS), run by dedicated community volunteers passionate about the value of the arts in their remote college town. The idea for a performance series originated in 1945 with Mary Monroe Penick, the music director and organist of the Lexington Presbyterian Church. She was also the supervisor of music for Lexington public schools. By early 1946, she was joined in the endeavor by Flournoy H. "Pinky" Barksdale. Col. Barksdale had returned to Lexington from World War II service to assume a position as VMI executive officer. He lent his lyric tenor voice to the Lexington

Above: excerpt, *To Peter and the Wolf* by Marion Junkin. See page 7.



Mary Monroe Penick, co-founder of the Rockbridge Concert-Theater Series, at her home on White Street. Miss Penick was a prominent civic and cultural leader and well known in the fields of music, teaching, conservation and historic preservation.

Presbyterian Church choir. In 1948, he succeeded Miss Penick as president of RCTS and served in that role for the next twenty-three years.

Together they became known as co-founders (and were de facto co-managers) of the concert-theater series.

In a 1988 letter, Miss Penick notes that she included “Rockbridge” when she named the series because she wanted to bring in people from the county and from Buena Vista. Similarly, the “theater” reference stemmed from her desire to present ballet and drama as well as music.

Each year, the Rockbridge Concert-Theater Series provided four events. From the beginning, tickets were sold as a subscription package. Single tickets were not available. For the 1960–61 season, series ticket prices for adults were \$7.50, or \$6.50 if purchased before May 15; \$5 for college students; and \$3 for public school

Suzanne Barksdale Rice was born and grew up in Lexington. She is the daughter of Col. Barksdale. She and her brother, William, thanks to their childhood exposure to the arts via RCTS, pursued a life in the arts: he as the technical director for Virginia Tech’s Drama Department, she as an arts administrator at Harvard’s Office for the Arts, Arizona Opera Company, Houston Grand Opera, the Pasadena Playhouse and the University of Arizona’s College of Fine Arts.

Anne Drake McClung is a lifelong resident of Rockbridge County. She is the daughter of Dr. Drake. She resides on her farm with Laurie Lipscomb, where cows, horses and chickens abound. Anne has written several books on Rockbridge County history. Her love of local history and interest in people, influenced by an M.A. in sociology from the University of Virginia, are the driving forces behind her work.

F. H. “Pinky” Barksdale, co-founder of the Rockbridge Concert-Theater Series and jack of all trades, aims a light on a RCTS set at VMI’s Memorial Hall.



Lexington News-Gazette, April 15, 1970

students. By the 25th anniversary year in 1970–71, ticket prices had risen to \$10 for adults and \$7 for college students, while public school prices remained \$3. Season tickets could be obtained at the Campus Corner, the W&L Bookstore, VMI’s Lejeune Hall and Southern Seminary, as well as by mail.

In 1958, it was estimated that 10 percent of the permanent residents in Lexington were season subscribers and that 400 to 500 students from Southern Seminary, W&L and VMI were subscribers as well. In an October 23, 1958, letter to the editor of the *Rockbridge County News*, Col. Barksdale explained that the concert series “regularly draws subscribers from Buchanan, Clifton Forge, Harrisonburg, Roanoke, and Lynchburg” and that “we have always had a gratifying number of school age boys and girls among our subscribers.”

According to *The News-Gazette* (June 22, 1994), in the early days Miss Penick carried season tickets in her purse, giving them to neighbors, friends and people she met socially, telling them they could send a check or return the tickets. Most people sent their checks. To promote the season, Col. Barksdale glued artists’ publicity photos on large poster boards, handwrote the details of date, time, and location, and walked uptown to place the posters in shop windows.

The Rockbridge Concert-Theater Series was obviously a community-driven endeavor whose officers and

board managers lent a hand in whatever way was needed. The organization held an annual meeting, inviting all members (e.g., subscribers) to attend. With polls and questionnaires, it sought community input to select the season offerings. Some performers returned by popular demand. In 1971, when the series celebrated its 25th season, Lexington Mayor D. E. Brady Jr. proclaimed “Concert Week” in recognition of “the quality of cultural life that the series has helped to give to Lexington.”

FOR ALL ITS SUCCESSES, the early days were fraught with uncertainty, as these 1949 diary entries from Col. Barksdale attest:

March 2, 1949 — After having 2 symphony orchestras cancel contracts to play in Lexington, we finally got the National Symphony of Washington and they played a very nice concert indeed in the W&L gym. I spent the day improvising a stage with the help of Washington & Lee people. First the Baltimore Symphony which had been engaged to play on February 25 cancelled. Then the Detroit Symphony, engaged as a substitute to play on March 7, cancelled about 2 days after I’d returned their contract!

March 3 — It is hard to believe, but the morning mail brought a letter cancelling the contract of the Foxhole Ballet, our 3rd attraction. This is too much — 3 contracts cancelled. Apparently, a contract with entertainment groups is not worth the paper it is written on.

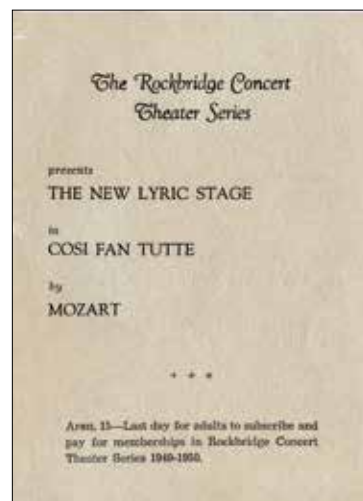
March 4 — It looks now as if we may be able to get the New Lyric Stage to play Mozart’s *Cosi Fan Tutte* on April 18 and for \$850, which was what we were to have paid Foxhole, and which is \$100 less than their usual fee.

April 8 — The New Lyric Stage’s *Cosi Fan Tutte* which we were able to schedule as a substitute for the cancelled Foxhole Ballet turned out to be a wonderful show, apparently tremendously enjoyed by all present. Afterwards at a small party at Mary Monroe’s the singers proved themselves as pleasant company socially as they were performers on the stage. Two singers, Teresa Stich-Randall and Alice Howland, stood out. Baritone Josh Wheeler was quite good and Rosalind Williams in a comic role was good. Her youth, looks and gay manner make her a grand person to know. It was a good party — We all stayed too late!

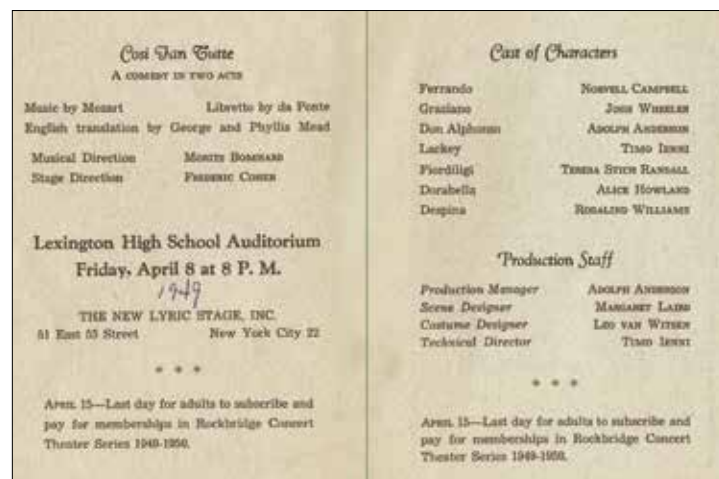
Photography by Marbeth



American opera soprano Teresa Stich-Randall is greeted by F. H. Barksdale at an afternoon rehearsal for her evening recital at VMI Memorial Hall, November 1963. In a glowing review of the concert in the *News-Gazette* (November 27, 1963), W&L history professor William A. Jenks praises Miss Stich-Randall’s “evening of superb musicianship,” “range and undoubted control,” “distinguished coloratura,” and “impeccable phrasing.” While most of Miss Stich-Randall’s career was in Europe, she appeared several times in the Rockbridge Concert-Theater Series. Her first appearance, in 1949, was as Fiordiligi in Mozart’s *Cosi Fan Tutte*. She was to make her Metropolitan Opera debut in that same role twelve years later, in 1961. We heard her first!



The mimeographed, notecard-size program for Mozart's *Cosi Fan Tutte*, performed by The New Lyric Stage on Friday, April 8, 1949, in the Lexington High School auditorium



The “good parties” continued. Long-term associations and friendships between artists and local folks were formed. And at least one marriage resulted, when Ruffner School’s beloved sixth-grade teacher, Irene Johnson, married a National Symphony Orchestra musician.

In three letters to the editor of the *Rockbridge County News* in October 1958, Col. Barksdale makes the case for the importance of the Rockbridge Concert-Theater Series to the community.

The National Symphony Orchestra sometimes had to work hard to honor its Lexington commitments, undergoing “much discomfort and strain” to get here in pre-interstate highway days, as Mary Tucker wrote in the *Rockbridge County News* in 1953. Here, seen on Election Day a year earlier, under the grateful eye of Col. Flournoy Barksdale, is Richard White, grabbing a sandwich as he unpacks his oboe after arriving a half-hour before the children’s concert was to begin. Orchestra members cut it that close so they could vote in their home precincts around Washington, D.C.

On October 9, he expresses the value of live performances: “I know of no living room big enough to contain the sound of a symphony orchestra in full cry nor has the recording been pressed that can rival that exciting live sound of the orchestra instruments tuning to the oboe’s ‘A.’”

On October 16, he writes of the concert series’ contributions to student life. He recognizes the importance of Southern Seminary, Washington and Lee, and Virginia Military Institute to the success of the concert series, noting that faculty and students are subscribers and that the colleges provide both venues and financial support. He notes that “the Series is a collaborative endeavor among the colleges and the town. Yet it is essentially a community enterprise, not directly sponsored by any of the colleges. As such, it is a service that the community offers to the colleges. Here the town provides the service — a manifestation of a concern for cultural values — and makes it available for the benefit and pleasure of college students.”



Lexington Gazette, November 6, 1952

“Varying impressions (top picture) are registered on these faces picked out by the camera from the vast audience of about 3,000 at last Thursday afternoon’s student concert of the National Symphony Orchestra in the VMI Fieldhouse. In bottom picture officials of the Rockbridge Concert-Theater Series, which sponsored the evening concert of the symphony, chat at intermission with Howard Mitchell, conductor of the orchestra. Left to right Col. Flournoy Barksdale, series president; Miss Mary Monroe Penick, vice president; Mr. Mitchell; and Mrs. Frank Martin, series secretary. Harry Deaver is treasurer of the series, which is currently conducting its membership drive for the 1954-55 season.”

— *Rockbridge County News*, front page, March 11, 1954. Staff photos.



On October 23, he speaks of the concert-theater series as a local financial asset:

This year some 130 performers will come to Lexington. Besides meals and lodgings, they will purchase gasoline, newspapers, and other supplies. One of our Lexington restaurants has acquired a reputation among a group of regular visitors for serving the best of a particular type of food to be found south of Washington. Once an artist performing in Lexington in early December did a substantial bit of Christmas shopping in one of our gift shops and took presents back to friends in New York. Whenever there is a concert there is an exchange of money for labor, printing, baby sitting, taxis and entertaining.

In the same October 23 letter, Col. Barksdale concludes with what is arguably RCTS’s most valuable asset:

The annual children’s symphony concert is made possible because the Series brings the National Symphony Orchestra to Lexington. It is successful because of the hard work of the Rockbridge

Education Association. It has been estimated that as many as 4,000 Rockbridge County school children have jammed the VMI Field House for a single concert. There is nothing like it anywhere else in Virginia. It is important that we continue to offer our young people entertainment that makes their hearts sing, lifts their spirits and challenges their minds.

NATIONAL SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA CHILDREN’S CONCERT PROGRAM

MARCH 4, 1953

“The Star-Spangled Banner”
 “Roman Carnival Overture” by Berlioz
 The first movement from Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony*
 Two movements from *Swan Lake* by Tchaikovsky
 “Pavane” by Morton Gould
Peter and the Wolf by Prokofiev
 “The Stars and Stripes Forever” by Sousa

As Col. Barksdale had noted in his March 1949 diary, after two other orchestras had cancelled their contracts, the National Symphony Orchestra came to town. It was to become an annual feature of the Rockbridge Concert-Theater Series, performing in Lexington for two decades.

Rockbridge County News, March 12, 1953



Howard Mitchell, conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra, visits with Francis Drake, narrator of Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*, before an afternoon children's concert in 1953. The newspaper reported that "a sea of young faces," numbering 2,000, sat behind the men.

THE NATIONAL SYMPHONY was founded in 1931. By 1986 it had become an artistic affiliate of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and remains so today. A very talented cellist, then twenty-two years old, joined the symphony in 1933. His name was Howard Mitchell, and he later became its music director and conductor, reigning for twenty years in that position. It was Mr. Mitchell who initiated the "Young People" and "Tiny Tots" concerts, and a groundbreaking series called "Music for Young America." Transcending differences and uniting the human experience through music was Mr. Mitchell's modus operandi.

Beginning in 1951, Lexington and Rockbridge County became the unlikely beneficiary of Mr. Mitchell's vision to bring music to children. To him, *Peter and the Wolf* seemed the perfect vehicle. Sergei Prokofiev's symphony was performed many times here with Francis

Drake, professor of Romance languages at Washington and Lee, narrating the story as Mr. Mitchell conducted the orchestra.

PETER AND THE WOLF is referred to as a symphonic fairy tale for children. Prokofiev had been commissioned in 1936 by the Central Children's Theater of Moscow to write a children's symphony. And that he did, creating a symphony that was enjoyed and adored by countless children around the world.

The story extols the many Scout-like virtues of vigilance, resourcefulness and bravery, as well as portraying Soviet themes of "stubbornness and the triumph of man." But that's the story — the story of a small boy living with his grandfather, seeing a wolf approach the family cat and a friendly bird, who both escape. The wolf captures the boy's duck, however, and swallows it whole. To get his revenge, the boy captures the wolf and ends up saving its life from hunters by turning it loose.

HEAR THE MUSICAL PERSONALITIES IN PETER AND THE WOLF

PETER	
GRANDFATHER	
BIRD	
CAT	
DUCK	
WOLF	
HUNTERS	



Courtesy of Anne Drake McClung

"To Peter and the Wolf" depicts the National Symphony with conductor Howard Mitchell and narrator Francis Drake (in wolf's clothing) performing *Peter and the Wolf*. The painting was given to Dr. Drake by its artist, Marion Junkin, who was a painter, sculptor and art professor at Washington and Lee from 1949 to 1973.

The timeless allure may not necessarily be the story itself, but the way different orchestral instruments are used to represent each of the story's characters. The narrator of the tale would prompt the orchestra to portray a character, and by so doing would captivate children's hearts. The piece delighted them and gave them a newfound appreciation for music.

The musical score illustrates the role each instrument plays. Click [here](#) or on the image opposite to be taken to a page that gives examples of the distinctive musical personalities Prokofiev attached to his characters.

IN AN ARTICLE in the *Rockbridge County News* (March 12, 1953) entitled "Growth of National Symphony Shown in Performance Here," Mary S. Tucker notes that "the annual visit of the National Symphony Orchestra has now assumed the aspect of a musical feast day, what with long lines of school buses bringing thousands of children to their special concert in the Field House at VMI in the afternoon, and a similar converging of grownups to the evening concert at the VMI gymnasium."

On the tenth anniversary of the Rockbridge Concert-Theater Series, an editorial in the *Rockbridge*

County News (March 22, 1956), reflects that: “The annual student concert by the Orchestra, under sponsorship of the Rockbridge Education Association, is an event in which this community can take pride. It is the only annual occasion which brings together virtually all the school children of the county, and it is an awe-inspiring spectacle when they are assembled in the VMI Field House some 3,000 strong.”

The children came from schools in Lexington, Buena Vista and Rockbridge County — and farther afield from high schools in Bedford, Buchanan and Troutville. They walked from nearby schools or rode in a fleet of yellow school buses.

Many students in the 1950s and '60s were prepared by their music or classroom teachers for what they would hear. They learned to recognize the music and identify the instruments, especially in the case of *Peter and the*

Wolf. A music teacher, Mrs. R. M. Hook, in a *Rockbridge County News* article entitled “Children’s Concert Is Gala Event” (March 12, 1953), reported that “the large number of children attending was truly a tribute to the cooperation of the classroom teachers, the music supervisors, and the entire school administration.”

Isabelle Sterrett Chewning reminisces about hearing the National Symphony Orchestra when she was in elementary school in Brownsburg:

We had a fabulous music teacher, Lucy Hook. Her husband was the principal at Rockbridge High School, and she taught music at the high school, and at the elementary schools that fed into RHS. For weeks before our trip to “the symphony,” we listened to recordings of the music we would hear and learned about the composers and the various orchestral instruments. The walls in the music room (which doubled as the

SOME RCTS PERFORMERS

The Rockbridge Concert–Theater Series offered a wide variety of performances. From soloists to large ensembles, classical and jazz to theater and dance, RCTS audiences experienced it all. Here are some whose visits to Lexington were sponsored by RCTS. You’ll recognize many of the names even fifty years later and more.

National Symphony Orchestra
Teresa Stich-Randall, American operatic soprano
Trapp Family Singers
Vienna Boys Choir
José Greco Dance Company
George London, American operatic bass-baritone
Dizzy Gillespie, American jazz trumpeter and bandleader
Joffrey II Ballet
Boys Choir of Harlem
Charlie Byrd, American jazz guitarist
Lionel Hampton, American jazz musician
New York Pro Musica, Middle Ages and Renaissance ensemble
Preservation Hall Jazz Band of New Orleans
National Theater of the Deaf
Eugene Fodor, American classical violinist
Alvin Ailey Dance Company
Paillard Chamber Orchestra
Ali Akbar Khan, sitarist
Delores Jones, American operatic soprano
Marcia Baldwin, American operatic mezzo-soprano
Charles Laughton, British actor

Luboshutz and Nemenoff, duo-pianists
Andrés Segovia, Spanish guitarist
Dublin Players
Boris Goldovsky Grand Opera Theater
Cornelia Otis Skinner, actress and playwright
Vienna Octet, chamber group
Beverly Sills, American operatic soprano
Solisti de Zagreb, chamber orchestra
Netherlands Chamber Choir
Prague Chamber Orchestra
Bramwell Fletcher, English stage, film and TV actor
First Chamber Dance Company
André Eglevsky Petit Ballet
Kim Borg, Finnish bass-baritone
American Savoyards, light opera theater company
Hartford Ballet
Piedmont Chamber Orchestra
Hungarian Ballet Bihari
Thomas Brockman, pianist
Paul Winter Contemporary Quintet
Roger Wagner Chorale
Max Morath, ragtime pianist

Courtesy of Suzanne Barksdale Rice



F. H. Barksdale, right, receives the first community service citation from the Lexington–Rockbridge Chamber of Commerce, on January 30, 1962. Making the presentation is M. W. Paxton Jr., chamber president. The citation honored Col. Barksdale, whose “outstanding civic leadership has greatly enriched the life of this community. As president of the Rockbridge Concert–Theater Series for 14 of its 16 years of operation, he has personally directed virtually every phase of its activity,” giving it “a consistent excellence that has made it the envy of other communities.”

infirmity and fallout shelter . . .) were decorated with posters of the instruments, and as we listened to the music, Mrs. Hook pointed out the instruments we were hearing. When the big day arrived, we boarded our school buses for the trip into Lexington where the NSO played at the VMI Field House. It was fascinating to hear the orchestra tune; there had been none of that on the recordings we had listened to for weeks. And we had only heard the music; the visual aspect of actually seeing the musicians play their instruments added a completely different element. Sadly, I don’t remember all of the selections we heard, but *Peter and the Wolf* and “Night on Bald Mountain” made quite an impression!

When Irene Pennick Thompson is asked if she has childhood memories of the National Symphony, her face lights up and she immediately exclaims, “*Peter and the Wolf!*” With her fifth- and sixth-grade Lylburn Downing schoolmates, she walked down Diamond Hill to the Field House to attend the children’s concerts. She says she was

spellbound by the array of instruments and the dramatic sound of a full orchestra. Her early education from music teachers at church and school, coupled with her experiences at the symphony, instilled in her “a deep appreciation for classical music that has lasted a lifetime.”

Irene Thompson’s husband, Vaden Hamilton Thompson Jr., considers *Peter and the Wolf* a life-changing experience. Highly impressed with all the instruments, he would go on to become a musician still known in Lexington as “Sticks” from his days in the rhythm-and-blues band, the Rhythm Makers.

Anne Lipscomb Burger remembers the music lessons and the school buses, recounting that the children’s symphony concerts were “one of my most vivid memories of elementary school at Ann Smith [in Lexington]. The excitement about the coming symphony orchestra trip was carefully built by Miss Penick in her weekly visit to school for music class. We learned about the instruments and heard their distinct sounds in preparation for the big day.”

Anne’s brother, Laurie Lipscomb, three years her junior, attests:

It was a swell time. All of us little kids were so excited because we had to form up and march from Ann Smith all the way down to the Field House, which was tons of fun. And then we get to the Field House and with great anticipation, the symphony would assemble itself and then Fran Drake would get up and introduce each of the instruments that were going to play the part of the characters in *Peter and the Wolf*. This was probably the most fun part of the whole day. The symphony itself was enjoyable and it was fun to be able to pick out the instruments that played the parts of the characters.

Co-author Anne Drake McClung notes that while she was quite young when her father narrated *Peter and the Wolf*, she does remember him preparing and practicing the reading and that the excitement of him doing this reverberated through their house and in their lives.

Sally Munger Mann explains that the orchestra “was exciting and cemented in me the enduring love for

Dvořák's *New World Symphony*, the soupy largo especially. I've always been a sentimentalist."

In addition to the children's concerts, the school-age children who held season subscriptions and attended the evening performances have their own vivid memories.

Betsy Letcher Greenlee recalls:

In my young years in Lexington, the nights of RCTS events were second only to Christmas as

a cause for excited anticipation. We got to put on our Sunday velvet dresses and patent leather Mary Janes in the middle of the week and go out at night!! It was like getting ready for a different life. The venues were humble, but when the program began, the magic of live performances transformed those homely places into unfamiliar, alluring worlds. Pinky Barksdale was a genius at attracting a wide variety of internationally known performers whose likes were usually available only to folks in large cities. Of the many

memorable performances, I will never forget José Greco and his dazzlingly costumed company of hunky men and sultry women leaving us thrilled and perhaps slightly scandalized by the fiery sensuality of flamenco dancing.

Lisa Tracy reminisces:

As kids, we were thrilled to be included in the adult world that encompassed the concert-theater series, but only in retrospect did we marvel at how the orchestra sat in folding chairs on the dirt floor of the old field house, just for us. Sometimes we were lucky enough to see evening events, even if they might be over our heads, like the production of legendary Irish playwright Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* by the Dublin Players. I remember being completely mystified as to what a "paycock" was. Only later did I understand I had seen the work of a man our local reviewer (W&L theater director Lloyd J. Lanich Jr.) called "the greatest dramatic poet writing in the English language today." O'Casey was still alive in 1958. We saw his masterpiece from our seats in the gym that doubled as the theater of the old LHS.

Kendall Jamison writes:

I think I was about 10 or 11 years old when the Vienna Boys Choir came to Lexington. I was truly starstruck. The music they created was so ethereal. Mary Monroe Penick was my choir director, so I had some appreciation of the work and discipline of a choir. But those voices were amazing. Some boys and girls from Lexington were invited to Mary Monroe's home to "entertain" the boys when they were in town. There was singing of Broadway songs around the piano. I got to play foosball with a few of the boys. I was struck with how good the choir boys' English was. It was my first awareness that being bilingual is normal for many people. Poignantly, I learned that the boys would age out of the choir when their voices changed. This was a memory I have treasured all my life. We were so fortunate to live in Lexington.

Co-author Suzanne Barksdale Rice remembers learning the sections of an orchestra (strings, woodwinds, brass and percussion) and was fascinated to

attend the afternoon and evening concerts and see the large violin section bowing in unison. She was particularly captivated to watch the percussionists moving from instrument to instrument, playing triangles or cymbals as the score required. For her, the timpanist provided a special treat as he leaned over his timpani, awaiting the conductor's signal. Then, with cheeks puffing in time to the music, he pounced on his kettledrums.

IN 1994, AFTER A RUN OF forty-eight years, the Rockbridge Concert-Theater Series rang down the curtain. Both of its founders had died. Times had changed. As artists' fees increased and season ticket sales declined, the series was no longer economically feasible. Other avenues and venues were providing competition. Broadcasts, including PBS, and local groups were more readily available. And beginning in 1991, with its newly built Lenfest Center for the Arts, Washington and Lee offered its own performance series.

Matthew Paxton IV was president of the concert-theater series when it went dark. He had attended RCTS performances from an early age and remembers "what a big deal they were." He goes on to say:

Getting world-renowned performers like Dizzy Gillespie, the National Symphony, and the Alvin Ailey Dance Company to Lexington was pretty remarkable. It was sad when RCTS ended its run but the fact that the kind of performances it had brought over the years were now available through the colleges made the decision to fold the organization a logical decision.

THE ROCKBRIDGE CONCERT-THEATER SERIES left behind a remarkable legacy. It was created, nurtured and sustained by a volunteer community of arts lovers. It provided many memorable music, dance and theater performances by world-class artists. It was a financial and cultural asset to Rockbridge and surrounding counties, to the cities of Lexington and Buena Vista, and to their three colleges. And thanks to it, literally thousands of children grew up experiencing the wonders of live music when the orchestra came to town.

COUNTY LORE: OLD JOE CLARK

*Old Joe Clark's a fine old man,
Tell you the reason why,
He keeps good likker 'round his house,
Good old Rock and Rye.*

*Joe Clark had a violin,
He fiddled all the day,
Anybody start to dance,
And Joe would start to play.*

Refrain:

*Fare thee well, Old Joe Clark,
Fare thee well, I say
Fare thee well, Old Joe Clark,
I best be on my way.*

Leon Johenning recalls Mary Monroe Penick telling him that she had gone to Irish Creek and found Joe Clark, the purported grandson of the Old Joe Clark of old-time music fame. Miss Penick invited Joe Clark to a children's concert at which the National Symphony Orchestra played the tune "Old Joe Clark."

Ann Carroll Weaver affirms the story with details from her November 4, 1956, diary: "After Sunday School, my father, Miss Penick, and I went to see a man named Joe Clark. Howard Mitchell's Concert is going to feature a song that was written about Joe Clark's grandfather."

Weaver goes on to relate:

Miss Penick seemed to think my father [Robert P. "Doc" Carroll, biology professor at VMI] would know

how to find this Joe Clark. I have no idea how he did know (he seemed to know lots of folks in Rockbridge County) and off we went. I went along for the ride, and I remember going onto a dirt road off to the left at the end of the Route 60 bridge entering Buena Vista. I think I stayed in the car while Miss Penick and my father visited with the man.

A few days later, on November 6, Weaver's diary entry confirms: "Howard Mitchell's orchestra was here today so we got out of school at 12:45 to see it." She's certain the orchestra played the song, and that Joe Clark was introduced to the audience.

"Old Joe Clark" is a widely known old-time Appalachian tune. It's a mountain ballad, with numerous outlandish verses and countless variations. Even the refrain varies from rendition to rendition. Its origins are attributed to Virginia or Kentucky, or beyond. A Kentucky state historical marker lays claim to the final resting place of Joe Clark, although it does state, "Early version as sung in Virginia, printed in 1918."

In 1983 Mike Seeger claimed the tune originated in Rockbridge County. In the music library Traditional Tune Archive, Seeger stated: "Joe Clark's father settled around Irish Creek, near South River, in the early 1800s. Joe Clark had a daughter, and a jilted beau is said to have written the song, out of jealousy, in the late 1800s. The Clarks have been family-style string musicians right down through the years."

Maybe, just maybe, Miss Penick and Doc Carroll were on to something.

Here's Mike Seeger playing "Old Joe Clark" on his banjo.

Play
"Old Joe Clark"

