

Ronald Demkee

KR: [02:00] My name is Kate Ranieri. I'm here from Muhlenberg College here in Wenner Hall with Ron Demkee. It's July 26, 2018, and I thank you very much for agreeing to let us interview you, learn about what your life has been with the band, with music even. So if you could tell me what your full name is and your date of birth, please.

RD: My name is Ronald Demkee. My date of birth is 10-27-43. We're going to cut that part. (laughter) Go ahead, I'm sorry.

KR: I'd like that redacted, please. (laughter) And you edit in 1965.

RD: (laughs) Believe it or not.

KR: OK, thank you. So what we'd like to do is begin with your early years. You know, like what happened in your life that got you interested in music?

RD: [03:00] I believe it was seventh grade that I really started taking a real interest in it, because by that time I was in junior high school in Whitehall -- junior/senior high school at the time. And I thought it would be kind of neat to be involved in the band, so I took some cornet lessons, and before you know it, I was playing in the band, and then subsequently about a year later, actually, my band director, John Walter, said I could really use another tuba

in the band. Would you like to try this? And I had given that no thought at all, but I thought, yeah, why not? I can give that a try. And I got involved in that. And about a year later I was already playing in the PMEA district bands, and that really got my interest going in how good a band could sound with all those instruments -- the oboes and the bassoons and the full ensemble sound. It just captured my attention. [04:00] So I gravitated to the tuba and have been involved in playing that ever since -- still play.

KR: Could you spell out PMEA for me?

RD: PMEA is the Pennsylvania Music Educators Association, and that's like the parent group of all the school band directors and orchestra directors and choral directors, and they have festivals in all three areas -- chorus, band, and orchestra. And then in the spring of each year -- late winter, spring really -- they have a festival which progresses from the district level to the regional level and finally the state level.

KR: And you were involved in that in high school?

RD: I was, yeah.

KR: And then after high school, where did you and your tuba go?

RD: (laughs) After high school I went to Westchester State -- College at the time -- Westchester State University and

took music education [05:00] with a performance major. After that I got into teaching. I taught in the public schools for 32 years, 30 of which were at Freedom High School in Bethlehem. I was actually the first band director at Freedom High School and stayed there from 1967 to 1997. After that, and even concurrently with that, I was band director for a time at Muhlenberg College and did some teaching at Moravian, so I taught another 15 years after retiring -- part time.

KR: And at that time, did you play in the Allentown Band?

RD: I played in the Allentown Band since 1964 until 1977, when I became conductor, and I've been conducting since. So this is my 41st year as conductor and 54th year as a member of the [06:00] band. But I also played in the Allentown Symphony Orchestra since 1980, and I was associate conductor, and now I'm associate conductor and Pops conductor of the Allentown Symphony.

KR: So what is your life like as a band director?

RD: It's exciting. It's really very, very enjoyable, and it's rewarding on so many levels. You get to work with some really, really talented people. They're enthusiastic people. They are high achievers, and it enables you do things you really like to do. Rewarding emotionally and

intellectually and physically even. So I've been very, very pleased with making music my life.

KR: So can you tell me about how, when you think back on the last 50, 55 years, [07:00] how has the band itself changed in terms of its makeup, its (inaudible).

RD: When I joined the band, we had about 55, 60 people. We're right now at about 65 or so, so the number itself hasn't changed that much. But what has happened is we are able to utilize a broader range of folks in the band. In other words, when I joined the band, Bert Meyers had 40 people who played every single performance. That was the core, nucleus group. And then if there were others, maybe another 10 or so, that would fill in as a substitute role, you know, that would happen. We now have, you know, about 65 people, but their lives are busier than they were in those days, and there are more performance opportunities in Lehigh Valley than there were at that time. We have very active musical theater [08:00] groups now in the Valley, so these players have opportunities to play in various musical theaters in the summer or whatever, and there's a little bit of a shift, so I may not have the same 40 on every performance, but I have depth, and I'm able to pull in other people who come to rehearsals. And that's a good thing. That's a solid thing. It's a comfort zone to have

the same people all the time. On the other hand, it's very good for the organization to be able to draw from a larger pool. And it's also good for the organization from the aspect of perpetuating. I'm thrilled to have young people in the band who are just amazing players. They're good musicians, they have great attitudes, and it's just the very strength of the band. As far as the literature, the band traditionally has played openings of buildings or patriotic selections, [09:00] you know, for patriotic concerts, seasonal things -- those things all still go on, but we are also able to program, I think, more music -- not I think, I know -- we play more music that was actually written for the concert band than we did when I joined the band. The natural programming of that period was transcriptions of operatic overtures, transcriptions of symphonic works, and even keyboard works. The band world has changed and evolved, and there are more people writing seriously for the band. So we don't throw that out, that's all part of our background and what we do, but we also are able to do contemporary and new pieces that are in some ways a little bit more challenging than some of the old transcriptions -- not necessarily from a technical number of notes and difficulty, but as far as [10:00] rhythmic shifts, especially rhythmic shifts. You know, asymmetric

measures and all kinds of different things that are just a little bit more involved than they would have been back at the turn of the century.

KR: The concert you had on July 4 in Bethlehem SteelStacks, the conductor...

RD: This is our 190th anniversary, and as part of the whole celebration of the 190th anniversary, the band commissioned a work from actually an internationally acclaimed composer. He's won composition contests in Europe and America, so he's very highly respected -- [Johann Demay?]. He's a Dutch composer, and I talked to him about doing it, and he's so busy that he was like kind of reluctant in a way, because he just has trouble keeping up with his own schedule. [11:00] But he had conducted the Allentown Band a couple years ago in a Side-by-Side, and in his words, he really likes the Allentown Band. So he took the commission, and he wrote a piece that we found was really very interesting. He asked me if there were any Pennsylvania folksongs that he might use in the composition, and we, you know, scratched our heads and looked around and, you know, came to the conclusion that there really aren't any Pennsylvania folk songs that would be worthy of using in the composition. So he said do you mind if I make some up, and I said fine. So he wanted to

do a suite, very similar to [Ralph Williams?] or [Holst?], and he decided to put together a suite. And instead of calling it the Pennsylvania Folksong Suite, he called it the Pennsylvania Faux Song Suite -- F-A-U-X. And he made up his own folksongs. He has The Girl From Allegheny, Banks of the [12:00] Susquehanna, The Gettysburg March, Punxsutawney Phil Waltz, and the Allentown Jig, so it's a very clever and very descriptive piece, and I think it's very accessible. A lot of the times when we hear of contemporary music or commissions, you'll hear the premier, and it never gets played again. It's just, you know, it's intellectually rewarding, but it doesn't get to the audience emotionally, whereas this piece, I think, is very accessible to the audience, probably because of the programmatic nature of it. But also it's tuneful. It's something people can tap their feet to and really hum along to, so I think it's a great thing, and we are very fortunate because Johann actually owns a company where this will be published worldwide actually, and his music gets played. So we're going to see the name Allentown [13:00] band on this piece as it gets played all over the country and in Europe as well.

KR: Quick question about the Allentown Jig -- the whole suite. There were beats in there where you were talking earlier

about some of the musical timing, a shift that sounded almost like it came from Dave Brubeck. If you don't --

RD: No, he was very clever in that respect, too, and I'm not sure he quoted Dave Brubeck, but he did quote Aaron Copland and Rodeo, and he was very clever in modulating from movement to movement. I think you may have been there, and you may have heard from the New World Symphony. And he used little excerpts, quotes. And musicians can do that. If you don't do too much of it, they get away with it. But in fact, it sparks interest because people recognize something that even though it's a brand new piece, [14:00] he's using something that they're familiar with.

KR: I was there. It was wonderful. (laughter) I'd like to hear from you about how your audience has changed, what kind of programming that you do in the sense of outreach to the community, the whole Lehigh Valley. I understand from another interview that the band used to play for Sunday school picnics, but things have changed. How so?

RD: Yeah, things have changed. The band used to play for quite a few church picnics out in Berks County and Lehigh County and so on, and a lot of those things have just disappeared, primarily because, like many institutions, they just couldn't get the people to work the picnic. You know, the ladies' auxiliary wasn't available to make the soup and

make the food and the hamburgers and all of that, so that element of volunteers [15:00] diminished, and as a result that form of entertainment, that activity has really gone down. We still play for one church-related picnic. It's one of the longest-running things we've done -- well, two. We do the Waldheim concert. This will be our 104th year at Waldheim in south Allentown over near [Mace?] Avenue. And also at the New Goshenhoppen Park in East Greenville, that's at least 90 years that we've been playing annually. So those things have really gone on a long time, and a tradition that continues. But by and large, we don't do a lot of those. We still do a number of concerts for the city parks. In the summer we'll do primarily West Park in Allentown, which is our home base for outdoor venues, but we also do a few playground [16:00] concerts to get the band out into the neighborhood and the city. The band plays at Miller Symphony Hall. The first concert the band played there was in 1900 when it was still the Lyric Theater. And I just thought about this -- the band actually played there before it was the Lyric. It was a hall where they did all kinds of entertainments. The floor was flat right up to the stage, and the band actually played for the new invention, the roller skate. So in the late 19th century, the band was in a corner playing as the

people were using this new invention, the roller skates. But then it was turned into a theater and then subsequently used for orchestra and concert performances. But the other thing that has really changed in the way of programming is since about 2007, the band has two major education [17:00] outreach programs, because we really know how relevant it is for us to communicate to get involved with young people. And the one aspect we do is the annual youth concert where I'll design a concert geared for elementary to middle school-aged kids, and it will have a theme in most cases where we introduce the instruments, talk about form in music, or it just depends on what the theme is. This past year we did Gustav Holst, The Planets. We invited an astronomer from Chicago to bring in film, and we did a multimedia thing with pictures of the planets while we played The Planets. Prior we did the same the same astronomer about two years ago who did video on pictures at an exhibition. [18:00] So we related the music and the pictures and science, so all of that. This coming year, the theme will be music and math. How does music relate to math, how does math relate to music, and just focus that on to -- do we want to...

KR: Can we stop it just for a second. (laughter) (off-topic discussion; not transcribed)

RD: I'm sorry about that.

KR: That's OK. We can just pick up where you were talking about the programming for the math.

RD: So these youth concerts are designed for students elementary through middle school, and we try to focus on something that relates to their curriculum. This year's program will be music and math. I'll show the ways that we count various meters [19:00] in four-four, three-four, five-four, and all of that, and division of beats and just give them something to relate on to that core curricula of math. So the other part of what we do in our education outreach is what we call Side-by-Side. We invite students, 50 or 55 high school students from the entire region, to join us for half the program, and they will sit in Side-by-Side and perform to the public. I've always felt that one of the best ways of teaching is mentoring and sitting next to someone who's really doing it. That doesn't mean that taking lessons isn't important. That's certainly valuable. But I think when they sit next to a person who has a lot of experience, they're learning nuances and aspects of music that they wouldn't necessarily get from a book or from a [20:00] teacher. So I think it's really important to do that. We've found them to be very, very successful. We've also had the good fortune of having really good guest

artists with us. We've had most of the conductors of the Marine band, for example, over the years. We've had Mike [Colborne?] -- these are all colonels -- Colonel Colborne. Most recently Jason [Fedeck?], and then Johann Demay was here, the composer and the conductor, to doing all of his works. So I think it's really important for those students to get involved and see that. And in addition to that, we have some wonderful guest soloists. Sometimes they'll be principal players from those military bands in Washington. Most recently we had the principal tuba from the Philadelphia Orchestra, Carol [Yanch?]. This coming year I'm really excited to say that we have Ronald [Romm?], the former principal trumpet of the Canadian Brass, with us. So I think that's going to [21:00] be a very big name and a big draw and a very big inspiration, you know, for a kid playing the trumpet in his school band and then hearing a professional player who's renowned as a performer and a player I think is a very exciting way of dealing with it. So, yeah, the two education things are the youth concerts and the Side-by-Side.

KR: So when I think about the people that come to these concerts since you started to where we are now, 2018, how has the demographics of your audience changed, like here at Lehigh Valley.

RD: The demographics have had an impact on the audience. I think the audience has always been -- not seniors, but -- yeah, seniors and more mature, you know, 50s and above, and we still have what you would refer to as an older [22:00] audience. I wish we had a lot more 30s and 40s and 20s at audiences, and we try to get those folks interested by doing various programs, whether it be Broadway or even light rock or whatever, but the substance of audience is generally a senior audience. The other thing that's changed is the numbers we used to get at West Park have diminished somewhat. We still get, on a good concert and a good evening when the weather is really, really great, we'll have upwards of 800 people or 900 people, but that's not the norm. It's been smaller. Years ago it was usually filled, so that part of it's changed. That's a challenge for us. One of the things we've done for indoor programs is more with multimedia. I mentioned earlier for the youth concerts we brought in film [23:00] to be projected onto the screen while the band is playing. That's something even the big orchestras are doing in the bigger cities, and often playing a score for a John Williams movie or whatever. Having said that, this year we have a series at Miller Symphony Hall, which is in addition to what we've been doing. The first one this summer will be a tribute to

Broadway where we'll have [Kiron Shinn?], who played Phantom of the Opera a thousand times in Broadway and in Toronto. So that will be a concert that's focused on Broadway. The second will be, and I mentioned multimedia, we're going to do a concert providing the music for a silent film. This is the Phantom of the Opera 1925, starring Lon Chaney, and the band will be in the pit with lights, [24:00] and we'll be playing music from the pit trying to reflect the action on the screen, whether it's chase music or something nostalgic or something very eerie, setting the mood just like the old piano players and organists used to do for the silent movies, you know, way back in the 20s, for example. So I think it's going to be an exciting adventure doing that. But again, we're trying to bring in some different aspects, get a hook, perhaps, on people's interests and getting them involved.

KR: Anybody behind me?

RD: (laughs) They are right behind you. They're moral support.
(laughs)

KR: I've others this question, and I'll ask you the same question in the sense of a message that you might like to send to whether it's the youth in your audience or the youth that play instruments [25:00] somewhere. Do you have

something, if we put a compilation of things that the band is speaking out to like, what --

RD: What is the question?

TONY: What was the question (inaudible)?

KR: The question is about music and about what would you like to say, you know, if I gave you the audience of the entire Lehigh Valley youth and here's Ron Demkee saying, "Here kids, I want to tell you this," something about the value of the music, the rewards, or anything. I mean, I'm trying not to put words in your mouth, but...and the door's closed.

RD: I would say, you know, give it a chance and get involved. If you are an instrumentalist, a musician, this is an opportunity for you to continue what you've started as a student in school or college or whatever, and it's a perfect outlet to do that. And it's really very rewarding, because you're dealing with people. You're dealing with other musicians. You're continuing to work with your skills, and [26:00] it's rewarding on a lot of levels, not the least of which is connecting with your audience. You know, when we play at a senior folks' home or any regular audience venue, when you see people sitting there smiling and relating to what you're doing, it's really a very special connection.

KR: Any others? I have one other question that has to do with music, and I'm illiterate, but somebody who was trained in opera music came to Muhlenberg and got really interested in Gospel music. She was the only white person there, and Jewish on top of that even. But she was talking about what would happen when they would get to this point where they were all singing, and it was such a point she said you could just feel (inaudible) --

RD: Energy.

KR: Yeah. Can you describe what that might feel like with the band when you feel [26:00] like everyone's all -- you're just becoming this sense of energy or something like that (inaudible)?

RD: Yeah, there's definitely a sense of energy, and certain programs will really bring that out. One of the most emotional things that we've done that I've felt is the first time we played at Carnegie Hall, we were playing Elsa's Procession to the Cathedral. It's a very, very dramatic transcription for band from the opera. And, you know, sitting there and hearing the sound in that hall and the emotion, the impact that was going on, it was really very, very special. It was one of those parts where -- wait a minute. Greg? When you get up there, just close the door. We'll know when to stop.

TONY: You want to try that again?

RD: Yeah.

KR: Sorry about that.

TONY: And one other thing Ron -- every time you tap your foot on this, the mic hears it.

RD: Am I tapping that?

TONY: Yeah, there's a little bit. [28:00] You can hear it a little bit, and I was like (noise). Just with that last one, not the rest of the (inaudible). No.

RD: Oh, OK. See how emotional I'm getting? Set me up on that.

KR: And the reason why I'm asking is because I was so profoundly struck by this student who just struggled with, number one is what that felt like and how to put that into multimedia as a documentary research student, and so it's bound to happen in the band. I was just wondering if it does.

RD: Well, it does happen with the band, and it's one of those moments where everything just comes together. It's a perfect storm of emotion and intellect and energy. And what happens is you're playing something you may have played a hundred times before, but the surroundings, the response of the audience, the togetherness, you know you really have arrived, because you're feeling it. It's

transcended just the notes on the page. You just feel an energy that is very exciting. [29:00]

KR: I know we got interrupted. Can you give me an example of when that's happened?

RD: One of the times that is memorable is our first trip to Carnegie Hall. We programmed a lot of very exciting music on that program, but one of the things that was a highlight was the transcription of Elsa's Procession to the Cathedral by Richard Wagner, and it's a piece that just builds and builds for six minutes. It starts very, very quietly. The arranger took the original instrumentation right out of the operatic score with a woodwind quartet, and then he added instruments and textures and instruments, and it just built and grew, and by the ending of the piece it just reached an amazing climax.

KR: Well, Ron, thank you so very much [30:00] for your time and for all your insight.

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