

Arctic Chamber Orchestra tours Alaska

"In seven years of touring we have never missed a concert," says conductor Gordon Wright. "I think that's almost some kind of miracle."

And a miracle it may seem when you picture the 35 member Arctic Chamber Orchestra touring the state on a tight budget, on all sorts of conveyances and sleeping in some unusual places.

Organized in 1970, the Arctic Chamber Orchestra was an idea which grew out of the already established Arctic Chamber Ensemble, a trio which toured Alaska.

"When I came to the University of Alaska in 1969," remembers Wright, "then faculty member Jean-Paul Billaud and I talked about having a small chamber orchestra to do the same thing as the trio. In 1970 we got a small group together a small sum of money, chartered a plane, set up an itinerary, and went on an extended trip with about 22 players."

Over the next six years, the Arctic Chamber Orchestra visited 34 Alaskan communities during their annual fall tours—giving 60 concerts and traveling some 25,000 miles. In taking Bach, Rossini, and Mozart to the city and bush, the orchestra used all modes of transportation from luxury jetliner to fishing boats and goat trucks, and slept in comfortable hotels as well as on cold gym floors.

The orchestra took classical music to places where residents had never seen a live orchestra, a violin or cello.

"I think we have broken down a lot of barriers," says Wright. "The people in villages discover that musicians and people from outside are human just like they are."

As for the city concerts, people see that symphonies

are not "just a bunch of people dressed up in suits." Like when the orchestra pulled up 45 minutes late for its Seward concert. Wasting no time to change into their formals, the musicians, including the conductor, performed in their jeans.

Wright says he is not always sure how the audience reacts to the music itself. He says its understandable in the urban communities, but its difficult to gain the perspective of a young Native child who has not been exposed to classical music. People are always polite and clap and Wright likes to assume that it was "interesting" to them.

On one occasion at a concert in a little school room in Hughes, the children sang along with the orchestra, seeming to enjoy the direct participation. Later Wright received a letter from a school teacher saying the cassette recordings of the concert were still playing around the school days after the visit. The children also sent him crayon drawings of the orchestra.

"It was really interesting looking at those pictures and seeing in them the reactions of the kids," smiles Wright. "How they say me, for example. I look 20 feet tall, and Paul Rosenthal has a huge beard, is wearing old jeans and playing the violin. So I know the response was good, but its nothing I could put into words."

While on sabbatical leave next academic year, Wright will be writing a book about the Arctic Chamber Orchestra and its traveling experiences.

"Its going to be interesting writing this book," says Wright, "because throughout our travels nothing really happened that was, anymore than vignettes."

But maybe something did,

once three years ago . . .

Wright remembers the time they couldn't find Gambell on St. Lawrence Island. The weather was stormy, the airplane low on fuel, everyone on it feeling violently sick and like sure goners. The pilot flew under the clouds only to discover choppy seas below them and decided to head back to Nome. They sighted the island and landed into a sleet storm and a 40 mile-an-hour winds, fortunately head winds.

"It took people quite a while to recover from that one," smiles Wright.

As for the vignettes which will make up Wright's book, well there was the time the musicians couldn't afford airline tickets to go from Annette Island to Ketchikan so they rented a fishing boat. The sailor had not license to transport people for money, so the whole orchestra hid below deck whenever a plane flew over.

And while on their way to Seward, they reached Moose Pass to find the Highway Department blasting away and the road closed for about three hours. The boxed group pulled out their instruments and had a spontaneous square dance in the middle of the road, to the delight of those cars waiting along with them.

Moving 35 people and their instruments from one concert to another requires a lot of planning and its all up to Wright himself, so he starts out early in the year. He gets in touch with proposed communities and hands them the unique bargain: a concert in exchange for a potluck dinner and local transportation.

Most of the Orchestra's touring has been done with the financial assistance from the Alaska State Council on the

Arts. Other support has come from the Fairbanks Symphony Association and several grants.

"We really do a lot of scrounging for money," points out Wright. "All the money we've ever gotten has gone into travel. We figure that some tours cost up to \$12,000."

According to Wright, the Arctic Chamber Orchestra has proven itself to be a reliable traveling organization of good

reputation and most of all good musicians. Members of the orchestra are picked players from the University-Fairbanks Symphony. In 1974 they received a commendation from the legislature for "their community spirit and their dedication to the arts in Alaska."

"The orchestra members are such an extraordinary group of people," says Wright. "I love

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Orchestra . . .

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traveling with them. They are flexible, they don't get rattled when they have to sleep on cold gym floors or ride in some smelly old truck. They are good about accepting hardships and most of all they are untiring."

Next fall's tour will probably take the orchestra to the Aleutians. It will be the first time anyone has been to the islands to give concerts, according to Wright, and for the Arctic Chamber Orchestra that will mean breaking a lot of new ground.