

GRANDFACES

Conducting himself with a passion for the arts

By KAREN FELDMAN

Maestro Andrew Kurtz maintains a lively tempo

Whether it's pop or opera, sacred works or classical melodies, Andrew Kurtz loves it.

That passion for music is what steered him away from a career in law and drives him to commute between Fort Myers and Philadelphia in a perpetual quest to conduct yet another concert.

As the creator, guardian and maestro of the Gulf Coast Symphony, founder and artistic director of the Center City Opera Theatre in Philadelphia, and founder and music director of the Florida Jewish Philharmonic (which features three of the world's top cantorial vocalists), the peripatetic conductor moves to the beat of his own creations.

No matter which group he's in front of on the podium, Kurtz approaches his role as conductor with the same zeal, striving to engage and educate the public and keep his musicians challenged.

As a conductor, he says, "I can totally express myself, be free and communicate better than I can with words."

He also plays violin in the Southwest Florida Symphony, serves on the Lee County Alliance for the Arts board and devotes a month each summer teaching young musicians at the Lucerne Music Center in Lucerne, N.Y. Last summer, he even managed to get married, although he and his wife, an operatic soprano, had to do some serious schedule juggling to make it happen.

Kurtz grew up in Philadelphia and went to the

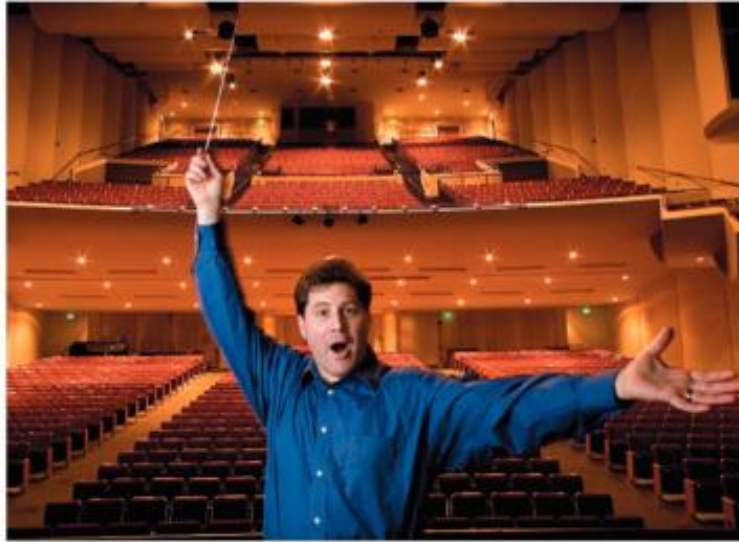


Photo by Andrew Kurtz

University of Virginia. He abandoned plans to become an international lawyer when, as a freshman, he fell in love with conducting and formed a chamber orchestra. He continued his studies at the prestigious Peabody Institute at Johns Hopkins University.

Fifteen years ago, former Southwest Florida Symphony conductor Paul Nadler invited Kurtz to become his assistant conductor. After a short while, Kurtz says, he realized he wasn't in tune with the people running the symphony, so he stepped aside. When the symphony went professional, Kurtz believed he could create a community orchestra composed of volunteer musicians. He now has 60 musicians on whom he can rely. They all have other careers but are committed to the Gulf Coast Symphony, its weekly rehearsals and the nine concerts it stages each season.

"I really see Lee County as a destination for the arts," he says. "Naples has a nice arts community,

but I bet there are more arts going on in Lee County."

Louise Sennell, executive director of the Alliance for the Arts, says of Kurtz, "The man amazes me with his energy and his talent, not just in Southwest Florida but in other communities as well. I think it's very important in a day when symphonies are falling around the country that Lee County is able to say we have two symphonies, and certainly Andrew's efforts toward creating and maintaining that add a whole dimension to the community we wouldn't have otherwise."

In accepting the Alliance's 2007 Angels of the Arts award for Performing Artist of the Year, Kurtz said, "Through music and the arts there are no language barriers, just the sounds and colors and ideas to which any human being can respond." ■

— For details about the Gulf Coast Symphony, call 409-1800 or visit gulfcoastsymphony.org