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He's a remarkable guy

For Dick Haber, the jump from law office to orchestra pit was just another adventure

By DIANE BAKOS
Special to the Bethlehem Press

Richard Haber is an unpredictable man. And that is as gross an understatement as you are ever likely to hear. Still, even those close to him were somewhat surprised when this well-known, highly respected, extremely successful attorney decided to leave his practice of 45 years and do something "different," which he'd longed to do since his childhood days. Something like, say, becoming a conductor. Of an orchestra. On Broadway.

Not something you would expect of a 65-year-old man? You bet it's not. But Dick Haber is not bound by the expectations of others.

Haber has a musical background. As a tot, he played records on the Victrolas in his father's appliance store while imitating the bandleaders he so often watched at the nearby Rose Garden. Then, when his family bought a piano for Haber's older sister to use for lessons, it was Dick who began toying with it and discovered he could play by ear.

"My parents were somewhat excited about this and so they arranged for me to take a music lesson," says Haber, who recalls being about seven at the time. But at his first lesson, the teacher proclaimed him to be beyond her capabilities and suggested he go to New York to study.

There wasn't money for that, so Haber kept playing on his own.

He also kept conducting pretend orchestras. He was doing just that at the Waldorf's Starlight Room the night before his sister's wedding, when the bandleader spotted him. He asked Haber if he was a musician. Haber said he played piano, and that night the little boy from Bethlehem made his musical debut with Eddie Duchin and his orchestra.

Haber is never one to back down from a challenge. While enrolled at Penn State in the ROTC program, he tried out for the Air Force band.

"What do you play?" he was asked.

"What do you need?" responded Haber.

"How about the bass drum?"

"Sure," said Haber, though he had never played a drum in his life. But he learned. Then he got "promoted" to cymbals, another instrument he had to learn. Then drum major. That's when he decided to march the entire band through the administrative offices, and the administrators suggested he keep right on marching. Band was over for Dick Haber.

No problem. He could indulge his musical sensitivities elsewhere. As chancellor of his fraternity, he decided it would be a good idea to have a piano in the house. So he ordered one. The night before its scheduled delivery, he realized his fraternity brothers had never voted on the purchase, so Haber called an emergency 10 p.m. meeting and got the motion passed. He noted that his frat brothers were rather amazed when the piano arrived a mere 10 hours later.

By 2004, Haber was married to Rosemary Murdy-Haber, a musician in her own right as well as a teacher. By that time Haber was looking for an "exit strategy" from the legal world.

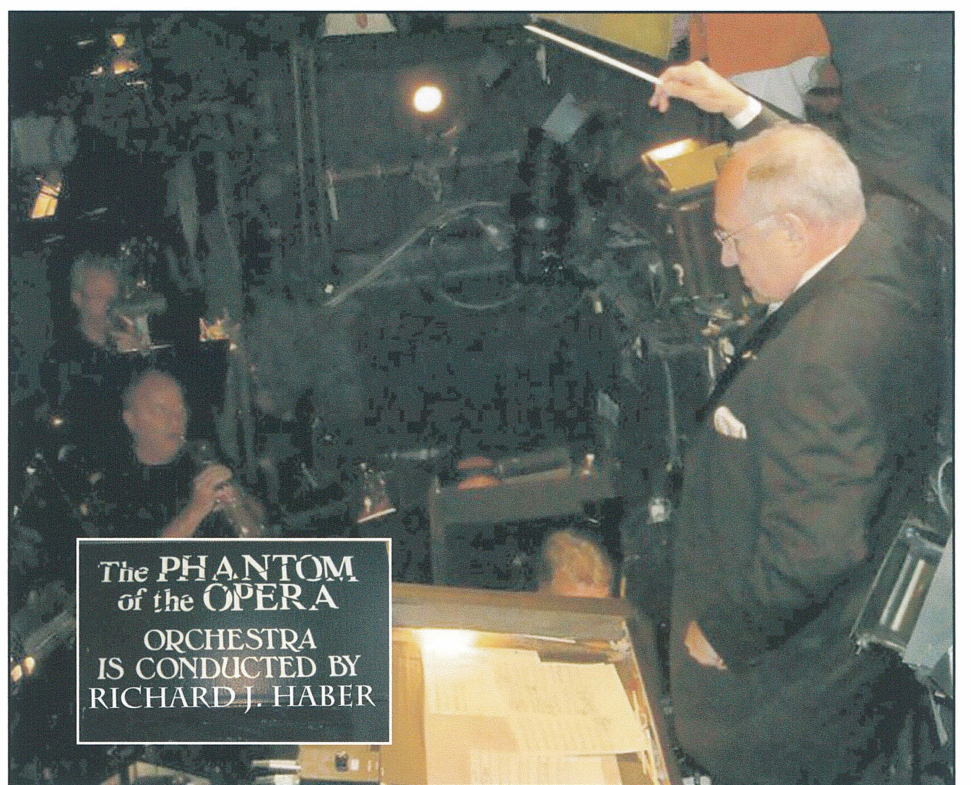
"I had always, since childhood, wanted to conduct," he says. "I asked Rosemary what the finest music school is, and she said Juilliard."

So 65-year-old Dick Haber applied to Juilliard, sat in the waiting room with the Broadway conductors of "Xanadu" and "Beauty and the Beast," and went in for his interview.

Maestro Professor Vincent La Selva describes their first conversation.

"I'm talking to him," La Selva says. "I found that he had never conducted. I found he was a little short in music. He didn't know much about anything."

One really important thing he didn't know much about was reading music. In all his years of playing piano, drums and cymbals, Haber hadn't learned to read a note of music. So how



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

Dick Haber nears the end of his Broadway debut conducting the "Phantom of the Opera" orchestra.

did he handle this seemingly major stumbling block? In typical Dick Haber fashion, he smashed the block to smithereens.

He put his heart and soul on paper, pleading his case and offering to audit the class for four weeks.

"At the end of four weeks if I can't conduct - if I fall on my face - you won't have to kick me out," he said. "I will leave gracefully. If not, I can stay in your course."

"Something in that letter told me, I just couldn't say no to him," La Selva says.

Haber did not fall on his face. He learned to read music and conducted "The Marriage of Figaro" for his class. In total, he spent more than eight semesters at Juilliard, never receiving a grade under A-.

Then in 2007 the attorney-turned-conductor led the orchestra for the ploy - the closing music - of a real, live Broadway production of "Phantom of the Opera."

Rosemary lights up with the memory.

"I was in the front row taking pictures and video and yelling, 'Bravo!' at the end. I was very proud."

That memorable

experience was the result of a program called "Broadway Cares." Potential conductors make a donation for AIDS prevention and in turn get to work with the production. In 2008 Haber went through the same program to conduct the ploy for "Mary Poppins." Just before he raised his baton, though, lead actor Gavin Lee stopped the show. To Haber's surprise, Gavin announced that, "After 45 years of practicing law, this man has become a conductor."

The crowd erupted into cheers. Rosemary says she cried with pride.

Conductor Krisen Blodgett, who worked with Haber on "Mary Poppins," is full of praise, calling him "enthusiastic" and "passionate."

"He just has music in his soul," she said.

Conductor and Grammy Award-winning producer David Lai was Haber's mentor for "Phantom." He says the two have become fast friends.

"Dick is very unusual to begin with," Lai says. "He's very much a creative spirit. Music is his passion and he's pursuing it. He's a remarkable

guy, and I'm inspired by him."

Haber has put his newfound skills on display at the local level, too, conducting the American Legion Band and "Carmen," "Haydn's Surprise," and "Aida" at Liberty HS. The school even granted him the honor of having him conduct his own composition, "America The Melting Pot."

However, Haber says, clients at home grew impatient with his absence and it became clear he needed to return to practicing law. He did so, establishing a solo practice in March.

"Reuniting with my old clients is like taking vitamins!" he enthused.

Maestro LaSelva released him with his blessings, promising there would always be a chair for him at Juilliard.

And perhaps Haber will return there someday. Or maybe another adventure will catch his fancy. If so, he will undoubtedly jump in happily with both feet.

"Life is so rich and full," he says, "and you have to be available to it. I believe everything happens for a reason. And if you do things with love in your heart, you can't go wrong."



The Habers celebrate following a concert at NCC, where Rosemary directs a student chorale.