

From dental advice to musical fame: George Kent of the University of Rhode Island

By Frank Chrupcala

George Kent first picked up a trumpet on the advice of a dentist.

“He told me it would fix my buck teeth,” Kent said.

The accomplished musician has done more with music than simply straighten his teeth. Kent, 72, has won numerous awards and has become one of the most recognizable names in Rhode Island’s arts community.

Currently a professor at the University of Rhode Island and conductor of the Chorus of Westerly, he is one of only four in the nation to include children in all of his performances. Children as young as 8 are involved, often singing with people 10 times their age.

Kent believes that younger people are capable of far more than they are traditionally allowed to attempt.

“Kids can sing the big works, too,” he said. “And they don’t ask questions like adults. They just do what I tell them to do -- it’s nice,” he added with a laugh.

Kent founded the chorus in 1959 while working as the choirmaster and organist for the Christ Episcopal Church in Westerly. Letting children and teens sing alongside adults in a chorus of high artistic caliber was one of his inspirations for creating the organization.

He has been the music director and conductor of the chorus since its establishment and does not currently have any plans of retiring or slowing down.

“It’s going to happen eventually, but not yet. I don’t know when,” he said. “We just had a big gig at the chorus hall in Westerly for our 50th anniversary two weeks ago.”

The hall, formerly a Catholic church, was dedicated in the conductor’s honor in 2005. The George Kent Performance Hall is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, according to the chorus’ web site.

Nearly 2,000 singers have been members of the chorus, many going on to their own successful careers in music. The current director of URI’s University Chorus, Andrew Howell, was a member as a child.

The chorus has performed in front of crowds as large as 28,000 at the Westerly Summer Pops, and has toured extensively in Europe, performing at St. Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican. Kent’s talents have taken him across the world, but he always returns to his home state.

Born in Westerly in 1936, Kent has spent his entire life, aside from touring, in the area. He grew up in Stonington, Conn., and eventually moved to Charlestown, where he still resides.

Kent played the piano when he was a child and said an elementary school teacher established his sense of rhythm and tempo at a young age by making him sing the syllables in a song before the lyrics. He started playing the trumpet in the third grade.

Kent would go on to receive a music degree from the University of Rhode Island for his studies with the instrument. He continued at the prestigious New England Conservatory under Roger Louis Voisin, one of the most influential trumpet players and teachers in the country. He eventually toured internationally with Edward Tarr, who also studied under Voisin.

Kent now teaches trumpet, organ and the history of music at URI, where he has been a professor since 1968. He taught at Rhode Island College in the early 1960s.

Kent meets with students for individual lessons, giving young performers an opportunity to learn from the most accomplished musical mind the school has to offer. Edward DeArruda, a junior at URI, is in his second year studying with Kent.

“The thing that sets him apart from any other professor I have had is he knows when to be a teacher and when to be a friend,” DeArruda said. “The one-on-one relationship he builds with all of his students is vital to them getting the most out of their training.

“He always reminds you to read the music carefully, and to keep the fundamentals of music in mind when playing a challenging piece. ‘The people paid for that note,’ he says, ‘and they want to hear it.’”

Not all of Kent’s students love music as much as DeArruda and his other upper-level students, however. His music history class is a popular general education course at URI. He relishes the opportunity to expose students to music they have never heard.

“It’s not my job to get them to like what I’m teaching,” he said. “It’s to get them to understand it and to know that it’s out there.”

Kent covers a wide range of music in his history classes, from Gregorian chant to Beethoven and avant-garde 20th century compositions. He claims to have no favorite instrument or composer, simply stating that “good music is good music.”

Calling Kent’s music good would be an understatement. He has been recognized by prestigious arts organizations, both local and abroad. He was given an honorary membership to the Royal Society of the Arts in England. He also won the Governor’s

Arts Award, one of Rhode Island's highest honors in the performing arts, in 1988. Since then, he has added to his list of achievements.

In 1996, the General Theological Seminary awarded him a Doctor of Divinity degree for his outstanding contribution to church music in America. Two years later, he received an award for excellence from the South County Center for the Arts. Choral Arts New England presented Kent with a lifetime achievement award in 1999, and the Rhode Island Historical Society deemed him a "History Maker" in 2001. He also won the Individual Achievement Award from the Arts and Business Council of Rhode Island in 2003 and the Pell Award for excellence in the arts in 2006.

"The arts, in general, are vital to human life," Kent said.

"But music uses the body in a different way from anything else," he added, displaying the love for music that has driven him to success over the last half-century.

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