

Queen City Community Orchestra strikes up a love for music

By Marty Minchin

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The orchestra is open to the community, and it is especially looking for viola players.

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It's a common story at the Queen City Community Orchestra.

A musician played an instrument in the middle-school band, but the instrument was forgotten in a closet as life moved on with college, marriage and a career.

Years – sometimes decades – later, the musician learned about the orchestra, a 44-year-old volunteer orchestra that doesn't require an audition and is open to anyone.

“Most of us here are amateurs,” said Nancy Joyner, 65, who is retired after working as a secretary for Mecklenburg Neurology for 20 years. “This is a perfect fit. We come here for the love of playing music.”

Joyner is the longest-serving member of the orchestra. She's played cello in the group for 40 years.

About 40 people attend the weekly Monday night rehearsals, bringing violins, cellos, violas and stringed basses. The group is led by Aleo Sica, 86, a retired professor from Queens University of Charlotte who founded the orchestra in 1969. The group began as a full orchestra, but Cica later narrowed it to strings.

The group plays two concerts a year. Both are free, and people who attend are encouraged to bring donations for local charities.

Orchestra members praise Sica's passion and dedication, noting that he teaches as he conducts rehearsals. Often, Sica picks up his own violin and plays along with the first violin section to help them learn their parts.

“Through the years, many of us have become stronger players because of his mentoring, his life-long commitment to music pedagogy, the orchestra and ultimately a love for people,” Jeff Strickland, who plays violin in the orchestra, wrote in an email.

For many in the orchestra, playing with the group is a second chance at music.

Kenni Brooks, 49 and an accountant, joined the orchestra about 15 years ago. She had played the violin in grades 5-8, but then her family moved and her new school had no programs for stringed instruments.

“You go to symphonies and concerts and wish you could play with a group like that,” Brooks said. “But most of the orchestras are professional.

“We just want to sit with a group and play. It's very fulfilling to play the music.”

Strickland picked up the violin while he was a student at N.C. State University, where he played in one of the university's two orchestras. When he moved to Charlotte in 1985 for his first job, he quickly found the orchestra.

He's been playing there ever since.

“Though other orchestras may play more advanced music or have more concerts, many of us are professionally employed and (QCCO) fits the bill perfectly,” he wrote in an email.

Other orchestra members have taken up instruments late in life. Leroy Sellers, a longtime professional musician and music teacher, plays in the second violin section with his wife, Dorothy, who recently learned to play the instrument.

Georgia Hinson, 74, a retired computer operator, had wanted to play an instrument her whole life. She began taking violin lessons seven years ago, and she said playing in the orchestra is “joy, joy, joy.”

Sica leads rehearsals with unflagging enthusiasm, directing a group diverse in age and race. Over the years, the group has had high school students, retirees and musicians who spoke little English.

The language barrier didn’t matter, Brooks said. Once the group started playing, everyone understood.

“We’d all sit down and play the same music,” she said. “It’s a universal language.”

Hundreds of musicians have passed through, said Eddie Mason, one of the group’s few viola players. He estimates that more than 500 violin players and 200 viola players have been members over the years.

The orchestra now is learning music for its winter concert, which will be in December at Charlotte Country Day School. The orchestra was long housed at Queens University, but it moved to Charlotte Country Day in 2011.

The concert will be dedicated to John Sipe, a celebrated violin maker who lived in Charlotte and who died in early September. Many musicians in the orchestra play instruments made by Sipe.

Sica and Sellers will play violin solos during the concert, and many other orchestra members will celebrate another season of playing music with a group.

Marty Minchin is a freelance writer.