



Photo by Thomas Veneklasen

SASO concertmaster Erika Roush.

Sept. 15, 7 pm

Southern Arizona Symphony Orchestra

Mexican Independence Day Concert

“You do it because you love it. It makes you feel alive,” Erika Roush, concertmaster for the Southern Arizona Symphony Orchestra, explains about why she has a part-time career playing music.

The Midwest native has been performing with the Southern Arizona Symphony Orchestra (SASO) since the 2003-04 season. Though growing up it wasn’t something she had her heart set on, her progression to the first chair of the violin section was a very natural one.

Roush’s mother was a music teacher, and her father was a pastor who had played viola when he was younger. “He let it go for many years, but when my two sisters and I started our respective instruments I guess that inspired him to play again,” she explains. “Our last name was Siaba, so we were the Siaba Strings Quartet. In high school, there aren’t a lot of interesting jobs you can have, and performing was a fun way to earn a couple of bucks for a wedding gig or something.”

Outside of the family group, her first exposure to being paid to play music was with the Clinton Iowa Symphony, which she performed with when she was still in high school. After graduation, she enrolled

in Illinois Wesleyan University, where she double-majored in math and music. “The math was supposed to be the practical part, and the funny thing is, I’ve used the music side of my education, but I haven’t used the math at all,” she says with a laugh.

She performed with various college groups, as well as with the Galesburg Symphony. The stage was set for what she would eventually do when she moved to Tucson.

She was a co-concertmaster for SASO for a while, and then went solo last season after her previous stand partner moved away. “I have to lead my section first and foremost,” she says of her role, “and then I have to be aware of what other section leaders are doing. Their sections are all watching them, and we need to coordinate. But the other section leaders are all great people ... everyone in SASO is.”

The orchestra, under the direction of Linus Lerner, is like a hidden gem in the arts community, shining every time it’s in the spotlight. Though most of the members have full-time jobs that aren’t performance-related, the level of musicianship is extraordinary. Additionally, every season outstanding solo performers join the concert schedule to the delight not only of the audiences, but also the SASO members.

One of the recent highlights for Roush was Hong-Mei Xiao’s performance of Martinu’s *Rhapsody-Concerto for Viola and Orchestra*. “I did not know the piece beforehand, but it was really lovely and she did such an amazing job. It will be interesting to learn another viola piece [Harberg’s *Viola Concerto*, Oct. 10-11] this season.”

The pre-season for SASO begins with a free concert for Mexican Independence Day, featuring vocalists from the Oaxaca Opera Festival and Mariachi Sol Azteca. The first regular season concert will be Oct. 10-11, and will include not only the aforementioned viola concerto, but also Tchaikovsky’s haunting *Symphony No. 6*.

SASO regularly performs not only symphonic classics, but also the work of living composers, including Richard White, one of the orchestra’s violists. “We’ve done a couple of his pieces, and that’s always exciting. It’s like, ‘Hey wait ... this guy over there — who I hang out with — we’re playing his works!’” Aficionados of local composers will be pleased to know, too, that SASO has recorded a CD of their compositions, including White’s “For Patte — A Simple Song.”

When Roush isn’t performing with SASO, or the Tucson Repertory Orchestra, she is working in administration at the solar installation company Technicians for Sustainability. For relaxation she reads, works on handicrafts such as knitting and embroidery, creates deserts (“I love to bake. Whenever I get invited somewhere I’ll bake something to take with me,”) and even sings. “Shape note singing ... it’s an old, traditional American form with four-part harmony that has a more open sound. It’s really awesome. You can read it like regular music. You’ve got the staff, but the head of the note will be a different shape depending upon where it is on the scale. You’ll have circles, triangles, diamonds or squares. It was a way of writing music for people who didn’t necessarily know how to read music. There’s a group in Tucson that meets twice a month. It’s fun.”

The commitment of this community to having a vibrant performing arts scene continues to impress Roush, and she sums up her feelings by enthusing, “Get out there, enjoy and support. **There is such a rich artistic life in this town.**” **Fox Tucson Theatre.** www.sasomusic.org.