

Arts Editor Catherine Anspen sat down with *Uniquely Houston* Managing Artistic Director Mark Powell prior to the Theater District Open House for a Q & A



Q & A with Managing Artistic Director uniquely HOUSTON. Mark Powell

By Catherine D. Anspen, Arts Editor

1. Childhood influences that led you to music?

My earliest musical memory is actually a small Swiss music box, given me by my grandmother. I think I was two.

Were your parents musicians?

Neither one, but both enjoy listening and there was always music in the house.

First musical concert you ever attended?

Probably the National Symphony at the Kennedy Center when I was 7. . . still remember that BIG red concert hall. Makes quite an impression when you're 7.

2. Where were you born and raised?

Born in Big Spring, Texas, raised in San Antonio, Indianapolis, & Gaithersburg, MD

How did this place influence your future career as a musician?

Dad was Air Force, so travel has always been part of my life. Home's where you make it and the variety of music and arts in each place I'm sure set the stage for what has become a pretty eclectic mix of tastes for me.

Do you have a Masters in music?

I do. In conducting.

From where?

From right here in Houston, the Moores School of Music at U of H.

3. Biggest career breakthrough?

Being handed a baton at age 16 with the instruction "Go"

Where and when?

National Music Camp, Interlochen, 1983

4. Favorite -- or most memorable -- performance ever for you as a conductor?

What, where and when?

Concertgebouw in Amsterdam – Mussourgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition with the Netherlands Radio Symphony. It's kind of a blur after the downbeat - except the very visceral memory of immediacy and the intensity of communicating great music with a phenomenal orchestra and an eager audience. August, 2000

As an audience member?

There've been many: Amahl and the Night Visitors in Zilkha Hall, a piece I commissioned for a string ensemble in a wine bar, a piano recital in a tiny Texas town's vaudeville theater, Andrea Chenier at the MET (listening to my better half Katherine sing with Placido Domingo), a very young Joe Gramley (one of my camper's at Interlochen!) at 14 – now a member of Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble, a Verdi Requiem in Mexico City, a violinist busking at the 86th and Broadway subway stop in New York. . . it's a big list. . .

What, where and when?

Everywhere. . . all the time

5. Top book of all time?

How I Did It by V. v. Frankenstein

6. What are you reading now?

The Oxford Book of Humorous Prose by Frank Muir

7. Top film of all time?

Babette's Feast. If you want a lesson in humanity and grace, watch it.

8. Top stop in Houston? (Restaurant, museum, etc)

Charivari & Epicure Café

(as you can see, I work Uniquely Houston, I live Uniquely Houston, and I eat Uniquely Houston)

In Europe?

The breakfast room at the Hotel am Dom in Frankfurt

Favorite world city, outside of Houston?

Too close to call - between Prague and Helsinki

Have you conducted there?

Almost – Plzen Philharmonic (Czech Republic) and Vaasa Symphony (Finland)

9. Most admired composer and why?

I know this is a geeky answer, but whatever composer's score I have in front of me at the time. So again, many, but I will say that Chris Theofanidis' (fellow Houstonian) work has all the elements of what makes music great to perform, share, and hear: involvement, interest, vitality. . . kind of like listening to Mozart, Dave Brubeck, Herbie Hancock, and Alicia Keys all at once.

10. Most unique venue you've ever conducted in?

Two A courtyard in Merida, Mexico at 9:00 p.m. under a bright moon . . . and the Diana Garden at Bayou Bend, under a tent . . . at noon. . .in July. . . whew!

11. Favorite stage in the world, outside of Hobby Center?

My kitchen

12. Who (musician) have you shared a stage with that you've most admired?

Loren Hollander – incredible pianist – incredible human being

13. What is the detail about you that readers would find the most surprising?

I taught Beyonce Knowles music theory at HSPVA. . . and look where it got her!!

14. Goal for Uniquely Houston ? Immediate ? Long-term?

What role does Uniquely Houston play in Houston's cultural life?

The role: A significant one, not just here but as a national model of arts advocacy and community building. Here we have it all, a brilliant theater, great technical personnel, and vitally committed people.

The goals: Continuing to share artistic vision and the extraordinary talents of Houston based performers with a growing audience; keeping the series well funded; and, most importantly, fostering the art and skill of collaborative communication.

15. How do you balance performing with administrative and advocacy roles?

By offering what I have in a given situation to the best outcome for all involved. It's an odd mix, but it continues to luckily carve a place - serving those with whom I work in a healthy and supportive way. I can't imagine doing anything I love more than bringing the performing arts to as many people, in as many different guises as possible. I am exceptionally lucky in that regard.

16. What are you most excited about career-wise in 2008 and 2009?

New collaborations within Uniquely Houston in places we've not yet explored, a couple of recording projects with American composer Brad Sayles, a stint as outfielder with the Astros. . . oops, fantasizing there a bit. . . and a rededication to hitting the treadmill everyday. . . .hey, 40's the new. . . . 38.

17. Interests and pursuits outside of music.

When there's time (ha!) – writing / flying (powered and glider) / sailing (wet) / swimming (very wet) / woodworking & metalworking / drawing & painting