Robert Hazen

In work and art, board member strives for “the highest level.”

By Pamela Toutant

Robert Hazen—scientist, musician, writer and philanthropist—is the quintessential Renaissance man. “Every day is fresh,” enthuses the 62-year-old National Philharmonic board member and recently retired trumpeter.

“I feel like I haven’t worked a day in my life.”

By day, Hazen is a research scientist at the Carnegie Institution of Washington’s Geophysical Laboratory, and Clarence Robinson Professor of Earth Science at George Mason University, researching, writing and lecturing on such subjects as high-pressure organic synthesis and the origin of life.

As a professional trumpeter since 1966, Hazen has played with many of the great opera, ballet and symphony orchestras. “My sense has always been that I want to do things at the highest level,” he says.

Hazen began playing the piano when he was 5, took up the violin when he was 6 and began playing the trumpet at 9. “My father practiced the piano for hours every night,” he recalls. “I usually fell asleep listening to him play.”

“Robert was one of the first to audition for what was initially called the Montgomery Chamber Orchestra and played in our first concert in January of 1985,” recalls National Philharmonic Music Director and Conductor Piotr Gajewski. “The National Philharmonic,” says Hazen, “has gone on to become an incredible success story.” In October 2010, Hazen played his last National Philharmonic concert at the Music Center at Strathmore.

Not surprisingly, retiring as a professional trumpeter hasn’t stopped Hazen from playing music. “I am currently studying the cello with National Philharmonic cellist Lori Barnet and play in a string quartet with my wife Margaret who is a violinist,” Hazen reports. In his “spare” time Hazen plays doubles volleyball, collects 15 million-year-old whale and shark fossils, writes books and enjoys ballroom dancing with his wife.

Contemplating the life of a man with such diverse talents, accomplishments and intellectual curiosity in both the arts and sciences leads to questions both mundane and profound. “We all only have 24 hours in a day. My secret is that for everything I do, I concentrate exclusively on that activity while I am doing it,” Hazen explains.

Comparing his experiences as both a musician and a scientist, Hazen says, “Being a symphony musician is a very precise endeavor. You must be able to perform the music exactly as it is written. On the other hand, being a research scientist is more like jazz, more improvised. I have an idea, but I don’t know where it will go or how it will turn out.”

“I am fascinated by the parallels between music and science,” Hazen muses. “For example, the chord harmonies we play in the orchestra are the same as the harmonic vibrations of the hydrogen atom.”

Gajewski has a deep appreciation for Hazen’s contributions as both a musician and a board member of the National Philharmonic. “For years, Robert has been a wonderful member of the orchestra. On the board, he brings a broad understanding of the music world and is one of our largest contributors. I will be taking advantage of Robert’s wise counsel for years to come.”

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National Philharmonic
Robert Hazen: musician, scientist, Renaissance man

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