

Tribute to Kenneth Kuchler
Utah Symphony violinist, 1941-2008

By Erich Graf

Kenneth Kuchler, a violinist with an astounding 64-year tenure (1941-1943; 1946-2008) in the Utah Symphony passed away recently. Uniquely, Ken was both a legendary figure in Utah's musical community but also an individual that few people knew well. He was a fiercely independent and private person, and if people attempted to overstep the bounds of his privacy, they were made to know it in no uncertain terms. During his tenure in the Utah Symphony, he served as both Associate Concertmaster and as general member of the first violin section. Ken was born in Ogden and received his higher education at Weber College, the University of Utah and obtained a graduate degree at the University of California—Berkeley. While in California, he studied with the eminent Russian violin virtuoso Toscha Seidel (a protégé of Leopold Auer) who immigrated to the US in the 1930's.

There were two annual events each symphony season at which Ken stood up to be acknowledged. The first was an education concert at Ogden High School—his alma mater. The second was during a military medley performed by the Utah Symphony every summer. Ken served in the US Army from 1943-1946, and was stationed in Stuttgart as a radio operator. Ken drove a tank briefly in Dresden and also participated in the Ardennes Offensive—the nefarious German attack on the Allies that occurred at the border of Germany and Belgium. This conflict later became known as the *Battle of the Bulge*. On the Utah Symphony European tour in 2005, as the busses drove through Germany, Ken spoke extensively to me about various landmarks as we passed them. He was most assuredly proud of his service to his country. Ken joined the Utah Symphony in 1941, performed for two seasons and then enlisted in the US Army. Upon returning to the US after World War II in 1946, Ken reassumed his position in the Utah Symphony and became an active free-lancer and esteemed music educator in Salt Lake City. He played both violin and tenor saxophone in the KSL Radio Orchestra, and developed an enormous roster of students over the decades with whom he left a profound love for music. For many years he served as Chairman of the Department of Music at Westminster College and received an honorary degree from that institution. While at Westminster he conducted the college orchestra, which he expanded to include members of the community who were interested in orchestral playing. The Westminster Music Department was disbanded for a short time in the 1980's during a non-Arts friendly administration. The indefatigable Ken took his orchestra with him when he left Westminster, and he re-named the ensemble the *Wasatch Community Orchestra*. This ensemble is currently in its 54th season, and has members whose families represent three generations of loyal affiliation. Additionally, Ken was a fixture in the orchestra of the Peninsula Music Festival in Fish Creek, Wisconsin. Ken developed a long-standing friendship with the festival's founder, Thor Johnson. Johnson was the Music Director of the Cincinnati Symphony in the late 1940's, and also served as director of the Interlochen Arts Academy and Orchestra and as chair of conducting studies at Northwestern University. Ken often recalled Johnson's efficacious leadership. Ken was also a strong advocate of Baroque

music. He spoke fondly about his friendship with Carl Dolmetsch—the son of the esteemed recorder maker.

When I joined the Utah Symphony in 1976 at age 28, I came to know Ken almost immediately because my bus travel seat-of-choice was across from his. He was very kind to me—an orchestrally young and naïve Erich Graf. Ken was always willing to listen with me to the music that I brought on cassette tape for the bus trip. More recently, he invited me on several occasions to perform as flute soloist with his community orchestra and also enticed me into the conducting role. Thanks to Ken and a little help from Max Rudolf's *Art of Conducting*, I enjoyed this experience more than I thought I would. Ken was very encouraging and assisted me to expand my musical realm. I felt his passion for music despite his somewhat gruff exterior. I respected Ken profoundly and solicited his advice on several occasions. He had uncanny intuition. When I was agonizing about whether to assume the presidency of Local 104, I called Ken for advice. When he answered the phone, before I finished saying "Hi, it's Erich," he said "Do it." He was also one of the most intensely moral and ethical people I have ever known. He was incapable of saying anything but what he truly believed. During labor and union stress in the early 90's, Ken was the union stalwart, even though it caused him a loss of income. Adherence to his own unalienable ethics made him angry at both himself and his colleagues. His commitment to his ethic can only be admired. This fact was further substantiated when Ken's brother Ralph (who furnished some information for this article) told me that Ken exhibited a love for music from the time he was six years old. At that time, Ken's mother bought him a piano, and the rest is history.

Ken Kuchler's Utah Symphony colleagues have indeed been privileged to know and work with him. I will miss this Gentle Lion from the core of my being.

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