

ALL TOGETHER NOW



BILL OLIVE: FOR THE CHRONICLE

YOUNG FAN: Parker Robertson, 8, has been going to classical-music concerts since he was an infant with his parents, Kate and Greg.

It's never too early to develop an ear for music

■ Appreciating classical works is a family-bonding experience for some

By **TARA DOOLEY**
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

It's tough for Parker Robertson to pick a favorite performance.

When pressed, he points to operas *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Cunning Little Vixen*. But he's attended some fine orchestra performances over the years, and musical theater has become a hobby as well as a pleasure.

"It's really hard because

there's so much things, like operas, that I really enjoy," he said.

Parker's 8 years old.

But since he was an infant, his parents, Greg and Kate Robertson, have taken him to concerts, operas, theater, musicals and ballets, sometimes in violation of age guidelines for children in performance halls.

As a result they have a young son who enjoys classical music, concentrates in pro-

ductions that would tax many a grown-up and contemplates the confounding mysteries of music such as why Don Giovanni wore that odd wig at the end of Mozart's opera of the same name.

"We like having that experience of music as a family," said Parker's dad, Greg Robertson, who is chief development officer for Houston Grand Opera.

Experiencing music in the concert hall as a family can require patience for adults and children. Arts organizations from the opera to the Houston Symphony offer a full line of

carefully conceived programs for children. But sitting in a room of youngsters galloping in their seats to Rossini's *William Tell* overture — think the Lone Ranger — might seem less sublime for someone who no longer plays cowboys and Indians.

Conversely, even a third-grader with musical tastes beyond his years might not make it through Anton Bruckner, an Austrian whose music is known for depth and length. And a squirming child can try the nerves of an arts patron who has paid a bundle to listen

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in silence.

"If we focus just on kids at concerts, parents are left behind, and they are the ones with the car keys," said Alecia Lawyer, an oboe player and executive director of the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra. "Sometimes they check out intellectually. I think if it can be an engaging thing for the whole family, everyone says, 'Let's go.'"

Getting everyone to go was the drive behind Lawyer's decision to start the orchestra three years ago. Well, that and a desire to create a job for herself.

As the mother of two children, now ages 8 and 4, Lawyer knew how hard it was for parents facing down "the 18 years when you don't do anything and go anywhere unless they are interested," she said.

So when she formed the chamber orchestra, Lawyer scheduled the concerts for a family-friendly 5 p.m. She started out offering on-site baby-sitting that extended beyond the length of the concert. That gave parents a chance to sneak out for a dinner date before retrieving their offspring.

But she also made sure that the children in the chamber orchestra's care learned about music and concerts. The program includes pizza and games, but it also offers music-appreciation lessons geared for different age groups. Children ages 5 to 10 join the audience for one short piece.

The idea, Lawyer said, was to incrementally develop an interest in music and concert going.

"We want them to become audience members as soon as possible," she said.

When that is possible depends on the child, said Ana Trevino-Godfrey, a soprano and a founding member of Mercury Baroque. It also depends on the repertoire performed.

"You don't want to take your 3-year-old to the Wagner *Ring* cycle," she said of the composer's epic four-opera series. "That's one way to say, 'Honey, don't ever go to the opera again.'"

Inviting children to the grown-ups' table of classical music is a way of allowing them to participate in their parents'



BILL OLIVE FOR THE CHRONICLE
LIFELONG INTEREST: "A lot of theaters have age restrictions. Only once or twice did an usher say, 'He's really small. Is he OK?'" said Greg Robertson. Robertson and wife Kate, center, have been taking their son Parker to theaters since he was an infant.

world, said Trevino-Godfrey, who also founded Prelude Music Classes for Children held at the Motherhood Center in Houston.

But it doesn't ensure a future audience.

"What creates a generation of concert goers is people who truly love music, and it starts in the home," Trevino-Godfrey said. "It's like creating a generation of really good readers."

At the Houston Symphony, administrators rely on parents to know when their children are ready to attend concerts, said

Steven Brosvik, symphony general manager. Last year, the rule that children had to be 6 or older to attend was changed to a guideline, he said. Symphony administrators want to encourage young concert goers, but they also try to be mindful of

other patrons, so ushers sometimes steer parents with young children to aisle seats, for example.

SOMETHING FOR ALL AGES

■ **What:** River Oaks Chamber Orchestra with conductor Lavard Skou Larsen plays Vivaldi, Villa-Lobos, Santoro and Mozart

■ **When:** 5 p.m. Saturday

■ **Where:** St. John the Divine Episcopal Church, 2450 River Oaks Blvd.

■ **For children:** From 4:30 to 9:30 p.m., child-care providers and music teachers offer pizza, games, videos and music-education programs. Children ages 5-10 join the concert for the Villa-Lobos piece.

■ **For adults:** The extra child-care time after the concert allows parents a dinner date before reclaiming their offspring.

■ **Ticket cost:** \$25 for adults; \$10 for students

■ **Child-care cost:** \$20 for the first child and \$15 for the others. Reservations required.

■ **For more information:** www.rcoohouston.org or 713-665-2700.

"You want to be sensitive to everyone else seated around them and the performance in general because everyone has paid to come," Brosvik said.

Over the years Kate and Greg Robertson brought Parker to many performances, but when he was young, they had a system. The couple purchased tickets near the aisle so they could zip out if necessary. They also made sure Parker arrived at the hall well-fed and well-napped. Often they attended with friends so Parker felt he was in comfortable company, Robert-

YOU MUST BE THIS OLD TO ENTER

Many classical-music or performing-arts organizations have age guidelines for children at regular or subscription concerts, though administrators say they rely on the parent's judgment on whether a child is ready for a grown-up performance. Here are a few:

■ **Houston Symphony:** 6 years

■ **Houston Grand Opera:** 5

■ **Mercury Baroque:** no guideline

■ **Da Camera of Houston:** Recommended 10 or older. Children younger than 5 not admitted.

■ **Houston Ballet:** For repertory performances, 5; For *The Nutcracker*, *Cinderella* and other ballets that appeal to children, at least 2.

■ **Alley Theatre:** Generally children under 5 are not permitted, but the theater notes which productions are not suitable for older children because of content or language.

son said.

Parker and his parents also discuss the concert program before the performance, and they steer clear of anything that might seem over his head. They also monitor themes of plays, musicals or operas for content or treatment that might be inappropriate or upsetting for an 8-year-old, they said.

"A lot of theaters have age restrictions," Robertson said. "Only once or twice did an usher say, 'He's really small. Is he OK?'"

Though music and theater lovers often take a night out for themselves, the Robertsons usually keep it all in the family.

"Quite honestly," Robertson said, "we get such a joy out of watching him learn and listen to music, we'll try to do something else for date night."

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