



Bill Benson

## A Community Treasure

BY MICHELE ROTHSCHILD | PHOTOGRAPHY BY KAREN VAISMAN

**T**he first thing that strikes you when you meet Bill Benson is his infectious smile and then, once infected, you are hooked. It is hard not to get excited when Bill talks about his “kids” he is honored to work with week after week, year after year. “I just love what I do!” he is often heard saying. Maestro Bill Benson is the Artistic Director and Conductor of the Conejo Valley Youth Orchestras. Founded in 1961 by Betty Bowen, at California Lutheran University, the organization was on life support when he took it over 9 years ago.

“Conejo Valley Youth Orchestra was a poor step child when I was asked to take it over, but like a child – it was irresistible. I could only see what this organization could be and should be.” So, in 1999, Bill gathered his best friends, colleagues, and fellow musicians to bring this program back to life. His inspirational call to the community, like a conductor raising his baton was heard and people began to take notice. Aspiring musicians lined up for auditions to be a part of the finest youth orchestra in the area. The organization

went from one small orchestra to three full performing ensembles that serve over 220 musicians today. Most of his students have gone on to impressive pursuits in their own careers, continuing their education at Julliard, Harvard, Princeton, USC, and UCLA. The list goes on and on.

The orchestras perform regularly in January and June at the Fred Kavli Theatre at the Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza and they are often invited guests to other venues in California. They have been guests at Moorpark College, The Onion Building in the San Fernando Valley, The Oaks Mall, and a number of other venues in the Ventura community.

Most recently, CVYO was invited to perform at the 2009 International Haydn Festival in Vienna. The Haydn Festival seeks to celebrate the Bicentenary Anniversary of Franz Josef Haydn’s death through concerts featuring his masterworks. Conducted by Maestro Benson, the students will perform in historical landmarks such as the Wiener Konzerthaus, the Votive Kirche, St. Stephen’s Cathedral, the Musikverein Golden Hall and the Royal Palace. It will be a life-changing event

for every student that participates in this extraordinary event. When asked about his reaction to the invitation Bill says, “I always knew we were destined for bigger things. I imagined that our first big event would be closer to home, like Disney Hall, but Vienna? I am thrilled!”

Bill believes that music should be an integral part of every person’s life and certainly, every child’s life. “I treat my young musicians like professionals, give them the utmost respect, and raise the bar much higher than they thought they could ever reach. I am always thrilled when they have mastered a difficult piece of music – it is a tribute to their talent and tenacity.” Of course what he does not say, is how these students are truly inspired by him. His selfless commitment to the organization and their success is what motivates them to reach for excellence and hone their talents. Our community is truly blessed to have such a treasure as Maestro Benson to direct our young musicians through their early music careers.

To learn more about the Conejo Valley Youth Orchestras, please visit their website at [www.cvyo.org](http://www.cvyo.org). **WM**