



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / GRETCHEN ERTL

Composer Mifflin A. Lowe, top, and arranger Greg Wardson, making faces among the animals at Roger Williams Park Zoo.

Will kids flock to the symphony?

Newporter Mifflin Lowe brings *Beasts by the Bunches* to the stage in Syracuse, N.Y.

BY CHANNING GRAY

JOHN ANDREW WARDSON
It was in the 1980s that he was a hot-shot copywriter for some of the area's top advertising firms. He'd won just about every major award out there. Trouble is he hated his job.

"It was a good way to make money," said Mifflin Lowe, who lives in Newport, "but a horrible job."

So Lowe regrouped and turned to his first love, writing children's songs and performing in schools,

libraries and festivals. He also wrote books. Now he has moved to a bigger arena.

The Syracuse Symphony commissioned him to turn his *Beasts by the Bunches*, a 1987 children's volume about the odd names used for groups of animals, into a piece for symphony orchestra. It was heard for the first time on Saturday in Syracuse at a children's program with Lowe doing the singing.

Orchestras are looking for

children's pieces, he said, in hopes of building future audiences. They have a "blank to fill."

"Orchestras need kids to get involved at an early age," said Lowe. "You can't wait until they are 20 to convert them."

The 30-minute score contains seven songs and one poem about the strange but true names used for groups of animals, such things as a "murder" of crows, a "knot" of toads, a "rag" of colts. For the crows,

the music sounds a little like the menacing theme from *Jaws*. There is also a rap song about rhinos ("It's a cross between Captain Kangaroo and Puff Daddy"), Debussy-like harmonies are used for the "smash" of jellyfish.

Orchestras can't be "musical museums," said Lowe. You have to approach kids on their level, like using rap.

"Part of it is what sound can an orchestra make," said Greg Wardson, the local jazz

pianist who arranged Lowe's music for orchestra.

Beasts by the Bunches was set to music about 20 years ago. Lowe, who plays the guitar, wrote the tunes and Wardson did the arranging. The songs are set in Dr. Seuss-like rhymes.

"These are the words you should know for each bunch of beasts, from the mightiest animals down to the least," it begins. "Now leopards, for instance, should be called a

SEE A WILD, F2

A wild time for kids in Syracuse

Continued from Page F1

leap and never a crowder, a clump or a creep.

"And never say elephants live in a school, for schools are all fish and you'll sound like a fool."

Lowe and Wardson go back about 30 years, to when they started a jingle-writing company. They created ads for an RV company ("We put you on the road"), Citizens Bank and Walker Tuxedos.

Meanwhile, Lowe began working for Duffy and Shanley, the Providence advertising firm. There he started writing books. He first came out with *The Cheepskates Handbook*, which has since been translated into Italian, Norwegian and Swedish. Two other volumes followed, *I Hate Fun*, and *How to Be a Celebrity*. Lowe has written two other children's books — *The Boogie Man (His Side of the Story)* and *Little Dog, Big Bark*. But those have yet to be published.

"They've come close," he said, "but no cigar."

He has also written a rock opera for kids about a mean king with fur underpants, and a story about an inner-city youth

who wants to be a cowboy. One of the songs, "Homeboy on the Range."

He recently finished a murder novel, which is also unpublished.

Initially, Lowe and Wardson approached the Rhode Island Philharmonic about doing the premiere of *Beasts by the Bunches*, but the orchestra was having money problems, and Lowe and Wardson didn't have a finished product to show them, said Lowe.

David Wax, the orchestra's executive director, said now that the piece is finished he's willing to "take a look at it."

"It's good he's doing pieces for kids," said Wax, "and with him being local there's even more interest in it."

Lowe ended up going with the Syracuse Symphony after surfing the Web for second-tier orchestras. The likelihood of getting a commission from the New York Philharmonic was slight. Besides, Syracuse seemed to be into innovative programming and might be willing to take on such a project.

Beasts was in the works about 18 months, said Lowe. Wardson, who teaches at the

Berkeley School of Music in Boston and performs a lot of local gigs, could only work on the orchestration part-time.

Last week, he was still sweating the proofs, going through hundreds of pages note-by-note. He couldn't help but fear there was some detail he had overlooked.

Jazz and pop musicians can usually recover if there is a snafu, said Wardson. It is much harder for a classical orchestra to fudge a mistake.

Interviewed before the performance, Lowe said he also had the jitters, waking up at 3 in the morning. But he figured if he didn't know the music after all these years, he'd never know it.

Lowe and Wardson hope to hire someone to market *Beasts*, they couldn't record Saturday's performance because they would have to pay exorbitant union fees. They will have to depend on the recommendation of the conductor. "He's got to like us," said Lowe. "Syracuse has got to like it."

There is even some thought of fleshing out the piece so that it is an hour long instead of 30 minutes and could take up half a program. Maybe it could paired with *Carnival of the Animals*.



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / GRETCHEN ERTL

Mifflin A. Lowe, left, and Greg Wardson joke around at Roger Williams Park Zoo; they have orchestrated Lowe's *Beasts by the Bunches* for the Syracuse Symphony, where it debuted Saturday with Lowe singing.

Lowe, who has performed with rock bands, plans to sing with as many orchestras as he can, although there is a score that could be sung by others. Lowe still does free-lance copywriting, but has for the first

time had to turn down work. The preparation of *Beasts* has been all-consuming.

This first performance wasn't a moneymaker, however. Copying the parts and proof-reading was costly.

But, Lowe and Wardson see the possibility of a livelihood. "We both feel," said Wardson, "that down the line we'll do well with it."

gray@pro.com / (402) 271-7452