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Breathtaking

By Nancy McAlister
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James Jenkins takes a breath. It's a full breath from the abdomen, expanding the lungs of his upper body and stretching the muscles that hold the rib cage. His chest fills with air.

When he exhales, he measures the immense flow through a mouthpiece and into a maze of shiny metal to create the deep, majestic sound of the tuba. It's been calculated that a tuba uses up air three times as fast as other members of the brass family. And Jenkins, principal tubist for the Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra, knows how to make it sing.

"Take a long slow breath so you don't lose any efficiency," Jenkins told ninth-grader David Jonas during a recent lesson. "Sing it. Breathe it so your air does all the work."

For playing the tuba, the amount of air is important. But more important is how you use it, he told Jonas. That outlook is analogous to the way Jenkins, 38, lives his life.

The Miami native is a much-in-demand teacher and a driving force behind several community projects, most recently one that would bring the arts to Jacksonville health care centers. A self-taught photographer, his elegant portraits of fellow musicians often convey the symbiosis of player and instrument. "What I enjoy most is trying to capture the soul."

In fact, soul is one of the words used by close friend Wynton Marsalis to describe Jenkins, whom he praised for an intuitive sense of communicating in his music and personal relationships.

"He's the most soulful, down home, cool person," Marsalis said recently from his home in New York City. "He's got a deep feeling, a great warmth. He can play with a big warm sound. And it's beautiful."

The world famous performer/recording artist stays in touch with his friend. Get-togethers are filled with laughter ("He's always cracking jokes"), pickup basketball and invariably some of Jenkins' famous cooking. "He can cook. He cooked a feast for our whole band," Marsalis said, citing such favorites as barbecued ribs and potato salad.



James Jenkins, principal tubist for the Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra, is also a teacher and the driving force behind several community projects.

-- M. Jack Luedke/Staff

Despite the occasional one-upmanship that goes on between friends, the renowned trumpet player admits he likes the sound of the tuba. "It's not as cute as the trumpet, but they have their place." Like any instrument, it requires constant practice. "But you have to have the character of that instrument in your personality. James has a great depth of feeling in his personality."

Those who play the tuba describe it as everything from the foundation of the orchestra, its bass and basis, to the root of the chord. Usually it stands alone, but it is also versatile, at times serving as the fourth trombone or the fifth horn. On the one hand a selfless part of the ensemble, it is also a cornerstone of rhythm and harmony.

"Everything else is improved by it being there," said Richard Stout, principal trombonist with the Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra who helped recruit Jenkins five years ago. Stout met his colleague at the Eastern Music Festival in Greensboro, N.C., where, for 16 years, Jenkins was a teacher, performer and ultimately a director. Like Marsalis, Stout had high praise for the way his friend plays the tuba.

"James' sound has a lot of warm overtones. That's really important for us on up the line to kind of fit into those overtones, to fit into that sound."

Breathing in life



James Jenkins, right, a tuba player for the Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra, guides David Jonas, 14, of Mandarin through one of their weekly lessons together.

-- M. Jack Luedke/Staff

Since he was a youngster growing up in Miami's Liberty City, Jenkins has breathed in life in large quantities. He credits his father James, 61, a retired minister of Friendship Missionary Baptist Church, with instilling values of education, hard work and returning thanks.

"There's a sense that he always wanted to be moving forward," said Jenkins, who lives in Mandarin with his wife, Marjorie, a former principal dancer with the State of Alabama Ballet, and their daughter Mahlia, 8 weeks old. "His role as a pastor was as a teacher, a mentor. So growing up it was seeing that and being around that. The crux of my life is learning from mentors and experiencing what I can and sharing what I've learned."

His father and mother, Lodine, also instilled a love for music early on. Like his dad, Jenkins sings bass and participated in gospel music at church. A football player at Miami Edison Senior High, he was recruited by the band director to play the tuba because of his size. He took to it immediately, enjoying its sound as well as its function.

"It's not an appreciably difficult instrument to learn," he said now. "But to get to a level of accomplishment is fairly challenging because it can be cumbersome. There's the sheer

physicality to play it well and the amount of air. It takes some dedication and concentration."

At Miami Edison, being in the band was a popular thing to do, especially since the halftime shows were patterned after those at Florida A&M. Without benefit of private instruction, most students taught themselves. Jenkins, who listened to and tried to emulate the best players he knew, recalled something his mother told him many times growing up: Surround yourself with the types of people you aspire to be like.

Tubist Constance Weldon, then dean of the University of Miami School of Music, heard Jenkins during one of the state competitions he entered and praised his natural ability. Earning a musical performance scholarship to the school, he eventually acquired a love for classical music, which previously he had considered boring with little for a tuba player to do.

The turning point was hearing a recording of the first movement of Mahler's Symphony No. 3 in a friend's car. Different colors of the orchestra were suddenly splashed onto his consciousness. Next was Berlioz and *Symphonie Fantastique*. "The picture was clear. The emotional impact was new, something I had dismissed. All of a sudden a veil of ignorance was lifted. It totally changed my perception."

Weldon came out of retirement for a year to teach Jenkins, who became her final student. From her, Jenkins got a solid foundation with musical concepts by which he still lives today. For the remainder of his years at Miami, his teacher was John Stevens, now a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison as well as a composer and conductor. Stevens' *Journey*, a concerto for counter bass tuba and orchestra, will debut in three performances by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in June, with his former student in attendance.

Jenkins, who is godfather to his younger daughter Abby, plays the tuba with a gorgeous sound and the ability to sing a song, Stevens said. "He has a very strong inner musical sense that communicates itself to the outside world very well."

The fact that Jenkins was tapped to be principal tubist for the Alabama Symphony while completing his college studies is testament to those skills.

"Many people play our instrument and play it really, really well," Stevens said, adding it's not unusual to get well over 100 applicants for an orchestral position. Just as the instrument has come a long way -- with more solo literature being written for it -- so has Jenkins in his role as orchestra player, teacher and friend.

"He has incredible integrity, musical and otherwise. Part of that has to do with the fact he's so consistent in his belief about how life should be lived, how he treats other people."

A teacher

Former student JaTtik Clark, principal tubist with the Oregon Symphony, said he and Jenkins had an immediate rapport when they met three years ago at the Greensboro festival. "James was probably one of the first guys I encountered who just seemed to be not so much a teacher of tuba but a teacher of music. He always pushed.

What are you trying to say with the music?"

The fact both men are African-Americans was also a connection. "There are not many of us in the orchestral world and, in tuba, even less."

Every so often when he gets a little down, Clark said he calls his former teacher to get on the right track again. "He'll ask if I'm doing this or that. He gets on me. He really cares about his students."

That caring has led to numerous forms of outreach for the musician, including teaching a limited number of students like Jonas, a Mandarin High School freshman who recently made the cut for All District Band. Another travels from Gainesville for lessons, yet another from Daytona Beach.

Since retiring recently from the Eastern Music Festival to spend more time with his family and to work on community outreach through the arts, Jenkins has been approached about starting a festival here and in Naples. Currently he is immersed in the start-up of a non-profit organization that would be a collaboration between the health and arts communities of Jacksonville.

Tentatively called Body and Soul: The Art of Healing, the idea is to enhance the health care environment by bringing in the benefits of live-arts experiences, including music, dance, painting and perhaps drama. With support from such leaders as businessman J.F. Bryan IV, attorney Lee Mercier and corporate communications veteran Joanelle Mulrain, the concept would target such sites as assisted-living centers and children's health care facilities.

"One of the purposes of art is to nourish and uplift the spirit," Jenkins said. "What more appropriate place to find or experience art than in a health care environment where one's spirit may be facing its toughest challenges?"

Inspired by his father's trips in and out of hospitals the past five years, Body and Soul is another example of this artist's need to stretch himself and expose others to the world he loves. For this particular challenge, a deep breath may be in order.

But, then, Jenkins is a pro in that department.