

CITY OF SOUND

Maestro Gregory X. Whitmore and O.C.'s Pac Symph's youth ensemble are planning for a major musical moment—in Vienna.

By Jerry Acker

Photography by John Dole



When Gregory X. Whitmore was a drum major—the baton-twirling, whistle-blowing leader of the prestigious University of Michigan Marching Band—he knew he wanted to do more with his music career than play his clarinet. He wanted to be the one who made things happen. This summer, that dream will take him to Vienna, Austria, the core of classical music, where he'll conduct O.C.'s 81-piece Pacific Symphony Youth Wind Ensemble (pacificsymphony.org). The nine-day trip includes a side visit to Salzburg. There's a special reason: the group's 10-year anniversary. Whitmore doesn't even try to hide his excitement. "They are fantastic, creative, highly articulate students," he says of the young musicians. "This is a testament to their dedication." The ensemble—woodwind, brass and percussion students in grades eight through 12—leaves on the Fourth of July. The group will play in three Vienna halls, including the historic Musikverein (home of the Vienna Philharmonic), as part of the Summa Cum Laude International Youth Music Festival.

The ensemble is a youth partner of the Pacific Symphony, the resident orchestra of the Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall. It was the troupe's internationally famous music director, Carl St.Clair, who brought Whitmore into its family three years ago. After his UM days (where he met wife Tiffani in the band), Whitmore earned a conductor-emphasis master's degree at Cal State Fullerton and a doctorate in music education at Columbia University. His first major job was as conductor for the Cathedral High School orchestra in the Palm Springs area. During his 12 years there, the group won numerous awards and made three national TV appearances, and Whitmore was listed in a widely known trade magazine as one of the 50 conductors who make a difference. He says: "One day, just out of the blue, I get a call from Carl St.Clair."

This is one of three jobs for Whitmore: He's also director of bands at Mount San Antonio College and conductor of the concert band at Cal Poly Pomona. His work has taken him to Europe, but never to Vienna, where Mozart ruled. "We had students in tears when they heard about this tour," he says. "A lot of them have never left the country."

Sure, there are rehearsals, fundraisers and plenty of artistic planning to be done—and figuring out how he, staff and parent volunteers will control 81 excited kids. "Conducting the students in front of an audience is actually the smallest part of the job," he notes. "But I love it all."