

# SYMPHONY OF THE VINES

## BIRTH OF A NEW CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

By Natasha Dalton

*"Just don't give up trying to do what you really want to do. Where there is love and inspiration, I don't think you can go wrong."*

---Ella Fitzgerald

James Riccardo is new to the Central Coast. He moved to the area when his wife, a psychologist, took a job at Atascadero State Hospital. The couple "was looking for paradise," and discovered it in the North County. They quickly found a house that they both loved, and Mr. Riccardo, a professional violinist, was about to begin exploring the county's music scene. Their new home town was beautiful, but very different from what James was used to. Until now, he always tried to live in the biggest city possible, so that he could perform. Looking at his new house, he now imagined practicing violin while gazing at the gorgeous landscapes outside, but wondered about his future as a professional.

As it turned out, the future was waiting outside: in a matter of days Jim joined a new orchestra. "It's a kind of luck," he laughs. "I have this feeling that music always finds me, and it's amazing how quickly it happened here! I remember two things about the day when I took possession of my new home. I walked up to the house, and found a citation at the door for not mowing the weeds. Then I walked down the driveway to meet my next-door neighbors. I knew that they had some difficulties with the previous owners of the house, because they were wild kids who played loud music. I wanted to put my new neighbors' minds at ease, so I just said: 'I play violin professionally.' The neighbor's eyes got really big, and he said: 'What? That's what I do!'" That's how James learned that he now lived next-door to the concertmaster of the SLO Chamber Orchestra, Ronald Kiel!

Soon they were already making plans about playing together in a brand-new, high-quality Chamber Orchestra, and Ron knew just the man who could make these plans a reality – Greg Magie, the French horn player in the SLO Symphony. Greg Magie, who holds a DMA in Orchestral Conducting, had worked with the Rochester Philharmonic, Cabrillo Festival Orchestra, Redlands Symphony, Port Angeles Symphony, Pasadena Lyric Opera, as well as choirs and orchestras at Po-



Greg Magie, Jim Riccardo and Ron Kiel

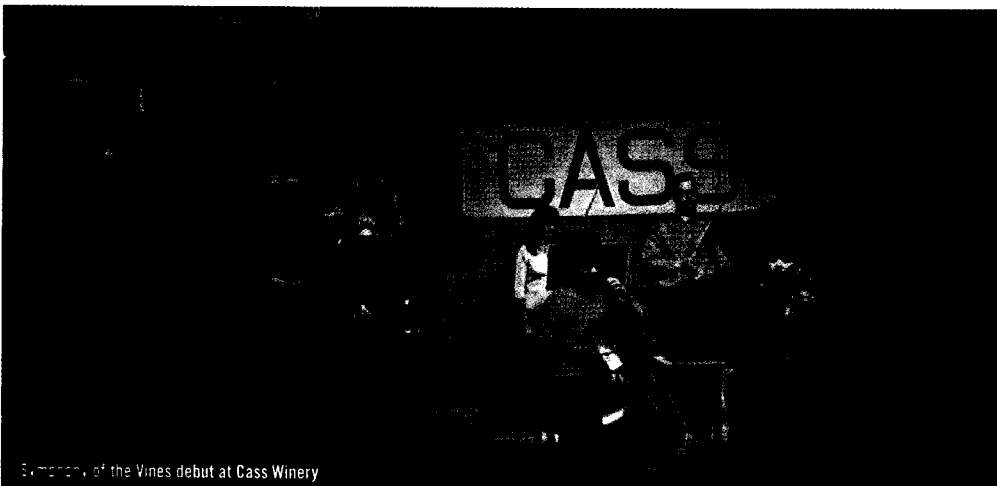
mona College and San Francisco State University. But when his ex-wife decided to move, Greg – wanting to stay close to his kids – gave up his established career, followed her to the Central Coast, and has since been thinking about starting a new local orchestra. "If residents of the North County want to hear classical music, they have to drive to San Luis Obispo. There aren't any orchestras on the North side of the grade. There're art galleries, successful businesses and marching bands, and I think the area is ready for its own backyard orchestra as well," he says.

"I am very hopeful that our endeavor will get off the ground, because I've been thinking for decades about how much I loved to play in a good small orchestra as opposed to larger symphonic orchestras," Ron Kiel says. "I spoke to people about it and was looking for a good conductor who could work in the format of the chamber orchestra," and Greg proved to be the perfect fit.

The Debut Concert of the Symphony of the Vines took place at the Cass Winery in September, and it was an instant success. "We wanted to make sure that when we put something out, it's going to be great." Greg Magie says. "People can accept a variety of music if it's played beautifully, skillfully and with command. Symphony of the Vines is already a well-unified, wonderful orchestra. Our goal is to make great music and to enrich the lives of our audiences and the community as a whole – and it was very encouraging to see such a warm crowd who obviously enjoyed the performance."

James Riccardo was pleased with the first concert as well. He, who in the past played with the finest national orchestras, including years with St Paul's Chamber Orchestra, was happy to once again work with experienced musicians who shared his excitement and enthusiasm about chamber music. Even though just a week before the concert he pulled his back – when the big day came, he was ready. "I wanted to be a part of the show so much that on Tuesday before the concert, when we had a rehearsal, the pain just went away," James says. "I could tell from that night that it was going to work. I was ecstatic to learn that Greg had put together a great violoncello section. We have three great viola players, and from the first rehearsal it was clear that they're real professionals."

Symphony of the Vines wants to be a great orchestra. More than that, they dream of becoming an orchestra like no other. They want to be an orchestra



Symphony of the Vines debut at Cass Winery

which is responsive to its audience's interests and which knows how to thrill and engage it. They plan to have at least four concerts a season, and to collaborate with great soloists and composers. Good opera singers, ballet dancers and fresh new music attract wider audience and are good for the orchestra, too: guests' artistry helps musicians reach the new heights of their own potential.

"We want to build trust with our public," Greg says. "And then we want to dazzle it with a rich variety of music."

"I love the name of our orchestra," James adds. "It doesn't sound like anything I've ever heard in my life. I was so afraid that the name was going to become something like 'Mid-County Community Chamber Orchestra' or something like that. I just think that it's a great name that conjures up such images! My big dream is that someday we'll have an outdoor amphitheater on the side of the hill. As far as I am concerned, it's always summer here - because I come from Minnesota - and I am envisioning summer nights; picnickers, gorgeous views - and enchanting music."

"To be impressive, music doesn't have to be terribly complicated," Ron Kiel offers. "The most important thing for us is to be able to play with musicians who love what they do - that's what makes a good orchestra. Good orchestra musicians aren't there just for money. A good orchestra is a group of skilled musicians with a common vision and personal compatibility."

Our orchestra plays with conviction and joy that inject enthusiasm and energy into its music."

Music lovers agree. "I was very impressed with the caliber of their performance," said Dr. Richard Snodey, of Nis Ti Si Tsa International, after the group's first concert. George Wilkins, the Paso Robles-based composer, who in the past worked for Disney Imagineering, is also happy about the birth of the new orchestra. "The more good music around, the better," he smiles.

"It's a small community compared to what I am used to, but it has three things: great climate, great wine and great music," James Riccardo sums up.

Who can argue with that? So now we have one more name to add to the list of the many Central Coast "greats" - Symphony of the Vines.

The Orchestra's upcoming concerts are scheduled for Oct. 24, Jan. 16 and April 10, at 3 p.m., at Atascadero Bible Church; e-mail [SymphonyVines@gmail.com](mailto:SymphonyVines@gmail.com) for details.



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♥ C.M. Florence, Board President

