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No strings attached

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/RICK MCFARLAND

Checking the measurements and fit of a bridge on a cello, Robert Rife does repair work in his home workshop.

MORE NEXT PAGE →

Continued from 40 (Ark Dem Gazette 4/20/97)

BY KIMBERLY GILLESPIE
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Walls, floors and furnishings harmonize for a welcoming medley of design throughout Arkansas Symphony Society Orchestra Guild Designer House XIV, says Helen Caruthers, Design House project chairman.

The Rogers House, 400 West 18th St., was stripped of everything that was not nailed down last month and was re-dressed by 24 interior designers and landscape architects in preparation for sightseers. The curtains were raised on the house at a Crescendo Party on April 4, providing supporters with a chance to celebrate the completion and get a sneak preview of the finished product.

According to Caruthers, designers were encouraged to echo the theme of the event by incorporating music in the layout of each room.

"Some used more than others — in some it's very subtle and in others it plays a bigger part," Caruthers says.

Music aficionados may note scores of sheet music, a cello, a zither and even some pop music records in various spots in the house.

The 9,000-square-foot house, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, is open for tours through May 4 from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, 1 to 4 p.m. Sunday, and with first-time extended hours from 5 to 7 p.m. Thursday.

Tickets are $10 for a one-time visit and $15 for run of the show.

"Almost everything in here is for sale and that's why a lot of people buy the run of the show — because they see things they like, and they want to come back and see them again," Caruthers says. "We get a percentage of everything that is sold."

Lunch in the tearoom will be prepared by Jimmy Weisman of Jimmy's Serious Sandwiches for $8 per person.

This year's Designer House belongs to John Bangert, who agreed to move out for three months so that designers could have free rein. Though the designers will take their furnishings and accessories with them when the tour ends, Bangert will return to a substantially improved home. With his approval, necessary for all permanent changes, new countertops and cabinets were added to the kitchen. Various wall-finishing techniques, some of which required numerous steps to complete, will also remain when all else is taken away.

Proceeds from Designer House will go into the symphony's general fund and will be used for the symphony's educational program, which strikes a special chord with Caruthers.

Caruthers has a degree in music education from Mississippi University for Women in Columbus, and teaches piano lessons. She is a former president of the Symphony Guild and has been involved in the guild's education programs throughout her 20 years in the organization.

Through "Orchestra and You," Arkansas Symphony Orchestra Guild members take plastic glass scale models of orchestral instruments to city elementary schools. They teach children how to hold the instruments and play taped music to show them how each sounds.

"This is impressive," she says with a grand motion from the middle of the Designer House sun room. "But that is what I enjoy doing."

The children she teaches seem to agree.

"We get a lot of letters from the students we see — some of them say 'It was better than I thought it would be,' " she says.

And, as anyone who works with youngsters would, she has a few funny stories. One boy, a second-grader, put on the pint-size conductor's uniform and was urged onto the platform to pretend-conduct — but he got a huge case of stage fright at the last minute. Instead of waving his baton in time to the beat, he burst into tears and made tracks from the stage.

Another of her favorite activities is the annual children's concert. This year, the orchestra performed *Peter and the Wolf*, with a little help from narrator Craig O'Neill. Most of the concerts are sellouts, says Caruthers, and at each one the conductor explains the performance and musicians give demonstrations on their instruments.

About 600 volunteers share Caruthers' interest in the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra and the guild's programs.

Among the event's supporters, Caruthers lists her husband, Dr. Sam Caruthers, and their daughter, Leigh, 23. Both of them are volunteering at the house. Leigh Caruthers and her brother, Brooks, 34, have followed in their mom's musical footsteps, with both taking on keyboard skills. Brooks was a music major at Hendrix College, plays the bassoon and is active in Red Octopus Productions.

There will be two shifts of volunteers in Designer House each day, leading tours and answering questions. Sponsors of this year's event are Comcast Cable, Arkansas Heart Hospital, Stephens Inc., Thoma & Thoma Creative Services, Millefleurs and Seasons.