

# Fitting in with the orchestra

**Key to the Door Weekly**

**July 25, 2012**

*By Fred 'Doc' Heide*

AFT's shows are all done with a live orchestra. In an era when many musical theatres are migrating to recorded soundtracks to slash costs, we've gone the other direction and now have four performers per show.

For our hit "Victory Farm", this means two keyboards, a drummer, and a guitarist. Yes, you read that right. Two keyboards create a rainbow of synthesized sounds to evoke the feeling of a much larger orchestra. These days that might be bassoons, accordions, or a whole string section.

This is quite a change from the early days of AFT, where the "orchestra" consisted of Fred Alley or me running around the side of the stage, standing in the wings of the audience, and playing guitar in front of a bald microphone. Nowadays we have a roofed band pit, high-end computers, and a Plexiglass wall around the drummer.

This summer I'm the guitar guy in this mix. Many folks report they didn't realize I'm there, tucked in against the back wall behind a forest of musical gear and three fellow players. That's OK. If I make a mistake, people will just assume it must be Eric Lewis.

## **Awesome Orchestra**

For "Victory Farm", the orchestra is Tim Lenihan and Jamie Schmidt on keyboards and Bergin Maurstad on drums. All have impressive credentials. Tim's played some of the biggest Broadway shows to ever hit Chicago, including "Wicked", "Billy Elliot", "Miss Saigon" and "Spamalot." Jamie, an Iowa native, is earning her masters at UWM, while Bergen studies at Elmhurst College and has jammed with many of Chicagoland's best blues players.

Amid all this talent I feel like a stowaway who crawled out of a guitar case. But there's a remarkable spirit of warmth and acceptance in our quartet. Whenever anybody hits a clam (musician-speak for "wildly inappropriate note"), the rest just giggle compassionately.

Usually there are 8 hours of practice 6 days a week during May and June for the full cast, but musicians frequently are called earlier and stay later. They even come in on their day off.

### **Sparkling Score**

Getting up to speed on James Valcq's intricate score was no joke. When I first saw it, I thought it beyond my physical capabilities. But after a couple of weeks practice, my triceps gradually grew strong enough to sustain the relentless required chucka-chucka. I could film my own exercise video.

And the chords? With my ignorance of music theory, many might as well be hieroglyphs scrawled on the wall of a Sumerian tomb. At one point in rehearsal I was trying to decipher what a Bbsus7 meant. Colin Welford, our music supervisor, explained that it was a chord from The Who's song "Tommy". When he performed the musical by that name in Germany, one of the band members had to be revived in a bathtub of ice.

There's a song in "Victory Farm" called "Hand over Hand". At 9 minutes long, it's the musical equivalent of Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness." Players must navigate upriver through aboriginal wilds of key changes and exotic time signatures. By the time you get to the other end, you wanna check your body for leeches.

It's helpful for me to know that the other players have also struggled to learn this stuff. Prior to the first performance, Jamie said she'd just cross her fingers to get through. Tim quipped, "It's gonna be hard to play with crossed fingers."

It's a pleasure nightly to play music of this caliber. And an honor to be a member of such a talented supportive team.

See you under the stars.

AFT presents “Victory Farm” Monday and Thursdays at 8 PM, Wednesdays at 8:30 PM, and Saturday at 6 PM. “Belgians in Heaven” takes the stage Wednesdays at 6 PM and Fridays at 8 PM. “Cheeseheads: The Musical” performs Tuesdays at 8 PM and Saturdays at 8:30 PM. For information, call 920-854-6117 or visit [www.folkloretheatre.com](http://www.folkloretheatre.com).



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