



Sleepless

By Alita Byrd

Inevitably, it begins with a 2 a.m. phone call. The cultured, cracked voice on the other end gives no hint of apology for waking you at such an hour. Rittenhouse wants to know whether you are coming on the next tour, whether you are joining the orchestra, whether you will be a much-needed oboist in an upcoming performance. “You can sleep when you’re dead,” as one oft-repeated Rittenhouse saying goes.

Virginia-Gene Rittenhouse has always squeezed every drop of richness out of life. She doesn’t waste time sleeping, arguing, or being overly polite. In the more than thirty years she has directed the New England Youth Ensemble, Rittenhouse has demonstrated to her students and her audiences that a life lived without

fear—a life where stretching the possible to its farthest limit becomes the norm—reaps untold rewards. And behind every performance, behind every story, behind every impossible-sounding scheme Rittenhouse dreams up, stands a mission—a mission to bring people together through great music.





World premiere in Carnegie Hall on March 2, 2004, of the *Vision of the Apocalypse*, Columbia College Chorale, James Bingham (conductor), with the New England Symphonic Ensemble and Virginia Rittenhouse (narrator, pictured extreme left). Photo by Leora De Witt.



It's true that Rittenhouse hasn't bothered to sleep much in her life. In her spare time during the last thirty years—between international tours and rehearsals in Takoma Park, Maryland, and South Lancaster, Massachusetts, and the endless organization involved in managing what may be the world's most frequently touring orchestra—she wrote an oratorio called *The Vision of the Apocalypse*. On March 2 of this year her work was premiered at Carnegie Hall in New York with a massive orchestra, a full choir with a second response choir in the back of the hall, four soloists, and a narrator who was Rittenhouse herself, standing at the microphone in a glittering dress and reading powerful words from Revelation.

"It was what I had dreamed of," Rittenhouse said. "It was one of the greatest nights of my life."

Among members of the audience that night at Carnegie Hall were numbers of long-time New England Youth Ensemble players and their families who flew in just for the performance—several flying from the West Coast for the day and back for work the next morning. Many others were able to get enough time off work to rehearse and play in the oratorio. It was a reunion of hundreds of people who had worked with Rittenhouse over the years and whose lives had been touched by her dynamic personality and sense of mission.

Rittenhouse has been working on the oratorio for almost forty years. "I always put it aside because I didn't know if the music was worthy of the words," Rittenhouse told the orchestra. Each of the three angels' messages are set to music in different movements and the opening chorus is a setting of Psalm 90.

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"I can't imagine the Adventist three angels' message has ever been set to music and played in Carnegie Hall before," said Larry Kidder, who has played with the orchestra since 1973. "I'm surprised not more of the Adventist leadership was there to hear the Adventist message being proclaimed from a very secular venue."

Rittenhouse was inspired to write the opening chorus for the *Apocalypse* when she was in Japan in 1966 performing her first oratorio. Later she worked on it for four summers in France with Nadia Boulanger, who taught composers like Aaron Copland, Philip

Glass, and Virgil Thomson, and is often considered the world's greatest influence on twentieth-century music. Boulanger was "so encouraging," Rittenhouse said. "She said that it must be performed."

So Rittenhouse continued to work on the oratorio, but she had plenty of other things to take up her time and she got discouraged. "Last summer I said to myself, either do it now or put it away," Rittenhouse said. "People are going to get tired of hearing about it. So I gave it one more try and miraculously, everything came together."

The premiere of her work at Carnegie Hall is only the most recent of Rittenhouse's numerous triumphs; she organizes two major tours a year, playing for kings, queens, and presidents in some of the most famous halls and cathedrals in the world, and in a remarkable number of little Adventist churches. Tour stories, from the sublime to the ridiculous, have been told and retold through the generations of orchestra members until exaggeration and fact have merged into one glorious legend.

As Kidder put it: "How does one top the experience of being in the New England Youth Ensemble? The rest of life is downhill from there."

It's true that with Rittenhouse, whether you are playing away in the orchestra or listening quietly in the audience, you feel that you are in the presence of someone who makes things happen and who changes things for the better. Rittenhouse brings music and beauty to people around the world, while demonstrat-

ing to her orchestra the power of music to touch lives and preach the word of God. This is her mission, and the driving force behind everything she does.

One of the standard phrases Rittenhouse uses in her offering call at concerts is that music "reaches across barriers and brings people together." Her voice breaks as she tells about playing in the South African townships to "the Vendas, the Xhosas, and the Zulus who outside were killing each other, but inside the church were singing together. And they begged us to play and we played for them and they sang for us..."

When newer orchestra members have the opportunity to take a South African tour themselves and hear the glorious music in the townships, the story they can repeat word-for-word comes alive and they begin to see for themselves the deeper value of music. "As I've gotten older I can't seem to find that in society," said Patrick Bitzer, who played with the orchestra both at Atlantic Union College and Columbia Union College and has often served as Rittenhouse's tour manager and right-hand man.

To Bitzer, one of the most memorable of the tours was playing for King Hussein of Jordan's birthday party and for Leah Rabin, widow of the assassinated Israeli prime minister, in the same 1996 trip. "How music could be used to reach across political and religious lines blew me away," he said.

With an unswerving belief in "the mission" at her core, the determined character traits Rittenhouse already possesses become even more pronounced. She refuses to take no for an answer when she feels something is important, and she insists that the show must go on—no matter what. She pushes and pulls and stretches the boundaries that most of us feel are the rules of society, until what seems impossible is turned into the everyday.

On one of the early tours the orchestra was riding in a big bus up in the hills somewhere in Eastern Europe when the bus came upon a bridge with a load limit. "The driver was very hesitant about taking the bus across," said Alfred Aalstrup, who is just a few years younger than Rittenhouse and studied violin with her when she first went to AUC. "But Virginia said, 'Just drive fast.' So he did."

Though her face has more lines, her back is more bent, and she now wears a wig of reddish curls, Rittenhouse still refuses to be inhibited. Stories of missing players, music, and instruments are legendary. With only one or two players, Rittenhouse can still create a memorable concert. "We will play this concert if we have to play it with two sticks!" is a famous Rittenhouse quote.

Certainly the concerts come first, but Rittenhouse is determined about other things, too. There may only be an hour or two to take in a city like Prague or Paris, but Rittenhouse is resolute that her kids see the most important sights. "We might have only slept four hours in the last seventy-two, and someone might sug-



PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRISTIAN STEINER

gest that instead of going to see the Queen Victoria flower garden at 6 a.m., maybe we could sleep a little longer," said Shawn Cabey, who started playing with Rittenhouse in 1975 and now takes his talented eight-year-old pianist son to solo on tours. "You can sleep when you're dead," is all the reply we get."

Of course, Rittenhouse's insistence on always doing things her own way can prove a trying experience for those around her. One of the many capable assistants who have helped in the never-ending job of managing the orchestra and its tours noted that "it didn't matter how carefully I planned a sightseeing day—it would have to be changed several times. She has a great ability to change plans five times an hour." There is also Rittenhouse's "faulty memory about what she agreed to do—or her selective memory, no one is quite sure which."

Rittenhouse subtly urges a selective memory on orchestra members, too. "She is the most genuine, authentic, and inspired spin doctor I have ever met," said one, who remembers prayers in the bus that skillfully recapped and reiterated the triumphant bits of a tour that Rittenhouse wanted remembered and made



part of the public record, leaving the more difficult moments behind.

But Rittenhouse doesn't ask anyone to do things she won't do herself. She doesn't have time to waste on trifles; nice hotels and sit-down dinners can squander time and money. She is perfectly willing to sleep on a church pew if that's where everyone else is sleeping, then share one grimy shower with forty orchestra members in the morning. And if she does it, an eighteen-year-old certainly can't grumble.

Cabey remembers traveling to Israel in 1981 and visiting the ancient fortress of Masada, overlooking the Dead Sea. "It was the middle of the desert in July," Cabey said. "The temperature was well over 100 degrees. There are two ways of getting to the top. One is by cable car and the other is the ramp that was built by the Roman soldiers when they'd finally had enough. Which do you think Dr. Rittenhouse and Harvey take? So here they are in their sixties, plunk plunk plunk up the footpath. They get to the top and they're fine. These people look like they've never seen the sun in their lives, but do they put on sunscreen? Ho ho ho, what's sunscreen? All these teenagers are just dying, and here are these two tripping along. By not acknowledging the difficulty, the difficulty does not exist."

Rittenhouse's ability to come out on top no matter what obstacles stand in her path is adopted by the orchestra members, who find their own ways of coping in tricky situations. Rittenhouse frequently announces songs or soloists no one is expecting. But soloists get up and perform difficult pieces beautifully without warming up and without any visible surprise.

To keep themselves entertained, some of the more cheeky musicians play with the sheet music...upside down.

Once the brass started Rimsky-Korsakov's "Procession of the Nobles" in a key different from the one written and the rest of the orchestra simply adapted. Of course, there is often the complaint that the orchestra plays the same music ad nauseum; so to keep themselves entertained, some of the more cheeky musicians play with the sheet music to Handel's "Overture to the Royal Fireworks" or Sibelius's *Finlandia* upside down.

Shawn Cabey, who is a brilliant pianist, claims he was a lousy violinist but Rittenhouse said he had to learn to play an orchestra instrument if he was going

to tour with the orchestra and play piano solos. "So I sat in the back of the seconds and got very good at pretending to play from age nine to fourteen," Cabey said. "I put soap on my bow so that it made no sound and I could just saw away."

Almost everyone who has come in contact with her has a story that illustrates the well-known adage that Virginia-Gene Rittenhouse will not take no for an answer. She has forced communist officials who cancelled a tour to retract. She has talked harried airport officials into putting timpani, basses, and a two-hundred-pound harp into the bottom of the plane. She has talked recalcitrant players into changing their plans—not only into coming on a weekend tour, but into changing their plans for college and often their careers.

Even world-famous composer John Rutter, one of the best-known living composers, who has conducted the New England Youth Ensemble more than sixty times in Carnegie Hall, has experienced her inability to accept refusals. He tells how Rittenhouse wanted him to conduct the orchestra on its South Africa tour in 2000.

"It was really just that she ignored me when I said no," Rutter said. "I was under a lot of time pressure and I wrote her a two or three-page fax explaining how I would love to join the tour to South Africa, but it would have to be another time. We met in New York shortly after and I was apprehensive. I knew she would have seen my long fax. So I said, 'Well, Virginia, I suppose you saw my note about the tour.' She said, 'Oh, I think I saw something, but you're coming, of course you're

coming.' And I know when I'm beaten. That's when I realized that if she's operated that way for the last fifty years, no wonder she's gotten so much accomplished."

Rutter went on to conduct the ensemble in concerts across South Africa then and again two years later. "The tour was inspiring and uplifting," Rutter said. "We didn't just appear in prestigious venues, but in the townships, too. She didn't care whether the audience was made up of officials or poor township children. She was just as eager to demonstrate what the orchestra could do to the children as to

the gilded audiences in Capetown City Hall.”

It isn't only the lives of far-flung audiences that have come under Rittenhouse's spell. Perhaps more than anyone, she makes a great impact on the people who work closely with her.

“I've learned a lot in her presence,” Rutter said. “If I feel bored or tired or want to give up, I think of her and find a bit more strength....Some people in life have exceptional force of personality without ever having to raise their voice. She is one.”

After the last big concert on the 2000 South African

learning their instruments very long, but they all made music at a level that was wonderful to listen to and had a sense of style and ensemble which was exceptional.”

He admires Rittenhouse not only as a person with extraordinary willpower, but also as a true musician. “I have always been struck by how good the string players are at playing Baroque music,” he said. “I have realized Dr. Rittenhouse's training lies behind this, as she has taught many of the string players personally. Dr. Rittenhouse is from a generation where playing tended to be indulgent, but she never has any of that. Tempos are brisk and there

She visualizes being at the end product...She visualizes where she wants to be, then makes commitments that make her get there.

tour, some of the students asked Rutter if he would stay to see any of the natural sites, like Victoria Falls, before heading back to London. He joked that he didn't need to, because he had already encountered a force of nature, and after Rittenhouse, what else was there?

It is a great compliment that a musician and composer like Rutter, with a towering reputation the world over, not only happily continues to conduct Rittenhouse's orchestra in Carnegie Hall, but has also toured with the orchestra, recorded a concert they played in England's Ely Cathedral, and invited the whole orchestra to his home twice for a gourmet vegetarian lunch.

Rutter first met Rittenhouse in 1987, when she requested a meeting with him to get some feedback on the score of her oratorio. They spent an afternoon at Rutter's home in England with the music spread out on a table in front of them. “I was certainly struck by her and by what she had written,” Rutter reported. “I had not yet come across the Ensemble, but fate brought us together the next year.”

MidAmerica Productions asked Rutter, who had recently begun conducting for some of their Carnegie concerts, whether he would like to try out this new orchestra they had found. “I remember being impressed by their attentiveness and attitude, as well as the dynamic presence of Dr. Rittenhouse at the front stand,” Rutter said.

After that first concert, Rutter, who is known for being ruthlessly exacting when it comes to the way music is played, agreed to work with the orchestra again. “I realized one could throw some challenges at them,” he said. “Some players were virtuosic and some had not been

is an extraordinary sense of vitality in the playing. She has jumped right into the modern ideas on interpretation, leaving lots of contemporaries far behind....This is an orchestra that listens to voices. There is a difference between playing a symphony and the Mozart requiem, but they know this. I think possibly it comes from the Adventist tradition of singing during prayers.”

Certainly an enormous amount of hard work, practice, and talent are wrapped up in Rittenhouse's musical success. But there is something more that makes her what she is. Cabey has thought for many years about Rittenhouse's dynamic presence and how it is that she has created such tremendous success in everything she does.

Cabey says that Rittenhouse's incredible talent and workaholic nature help, but that isn't what really sets her apart. “She visualizes being at the end product,” he said. “She visualizes where she wants to be, then makes commitments that make her get there. Say you are young, strong, and athletic, but you can't swim. Most of us would plan to take swimming lessons, call around for teachers, go out and buy a swimming suit—do all those rational things first. She just jumps out of the rowboat and keeps her eye on the island. She just decides what her goal is and gets there. If you take even a part of that philosophy and incorporate it into your life, it will have an enormous impact on an enormous number of people. She has taught us all a lot—a lot more than just music lessons.”



Rittenhouse's "mission" has inspired an uncountable number of students over the last half-century, who are now in turn touching the lives of others. Students who played in the New England Youth Ensemble have gone on to start string ensembles of their own, to be professional musicians, to be doctors, teachers, and missionaries. Many of the teachers who conduct music programs at Adventist schools across the United States spent years touring with Rittenhouse.

Naomi Burns Delafield, who played as concertmistress of the orchestra for many years after it moved to CUC, has started a string orchestra in Alberta, Canada, that is currently playing concerts to raise money for children in Afghanistan who have lost limbs in land mine accidents. "I was headed for either farm management or veterinary nursing in Australia, because I hated the violin," Naomi said.

Naomi first met Rittenhouse when the orchestra was touring Australia in 1988 and she was just fourteen. Like the first encounters of so many others, Naomi was urged to play for Rittenhouse and that evening she played the second movement of the Mendelssohn violin concerto with the orchestra for a concert. Rittenhouse kept in touch and, with the help of other orchestra members including violist David Delafield, convinced Naomi to come to CUC when she started college.

After graduating from CUC and working as Rittenhouse's assistant and tour manager for several years, Naomi married fellow orchestra member Delafield and moved with him to Canada. They were only the latest couple in a long line of orchestra

Many say that Rittenhouse's lack of fear and inhibition, as well as her deep sense of mission, comes from her background; she spent most of her early years in Africa as the only child of indomitable missionary parents.

"Caution is foreign to her at the deepest level," said Cabey. "She grew up as a missionary child in the 1930s, when if you got sick you died. She doesn't like taking time to analyze and accept things. Her style is just to plow forward."

"I can't listen to all the voices saying my ideas are dangerous," Rittenhouse explained. "It's very seldom I'll give up anything—once I feel a thing is valuable I'll push on beyond the possible."

Virginia-Gene Shankel was born on October 15, 1922, while her father, George Shankel, was teaching at Canadian Union College in Alberta. Three years later he accepted a call to teach history at Helderberg College near Capetown, South Africa. Rittenhouse's mother, a dramatist and musician with a background on the stage, began teaching her young daughter to play the piano and by the time she was three years old Rittenhouse was already composing her own songs, both words and music.

It is impossible to overestimate the impact Mrs. Shankel had on her daughter. "My mother was the moving spirit behind my life," Rittenhouse said. "She was my accompanist, school teacher, and closest friend. If anything was the influence of my life, it was her. The biggest compliment I could ever get is that I remind someone of my mother. She was witty, deeply spiritual and a marvelous mother and teacher."

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couples to wed, including Naomi's brother Terry, who married another first violinist.

How many orchestra couples have gotten married over the years? "Oh my, I think the last count was twenty-five weddings of ensemble members," Rittenhouse said. But many say this count is probably outdated. There are obvious reasons for this kind of inward attraction. "If you weren't dating someone in the ensemble, you probably wouldn't see them very often," said Kidder, who married another orchestra member, as did his two sisters.

Anyone who knew Mrs. Shankel speaks of her with deep sighs of admiration. "With Mrs. Shankel you were dealing not only with incredible talent in bushels flowing out of every pore, but also dealing with someone with astonishing wisdom and quite an exceptional soul," Cabey said, who took piano lessons from Rittenhouse's mother when he was very young, as did many of the first orchestra members. "My mother literally never once disappointed me and she is my adored best friend. But I once told her I thought Mrs. Shankel was even better. That kind of sums it up."



PHOTO COURTESY OF VIRGINIA-GENE RITTENHOUSE

Backstage at Carnegie Hall: Norman Dunfee, executive director of MidAmerica, who presented the performance, congratulates Rittenhouse and her husband, Harvey Rittenhouse.

Rittenhouse certainly inherited her mother's flair for the dramatic, although people who knew Mrs. Shankel said she had an even greater talent onstage. "Her mother was captivating," Aalstrup says. "She gave programs at AUC for all the clubs and she was hilarious. Once she sat at the piano, portraying a student at his first recital. She comes to the piano chewing gum like nobody's business, pulling it out in a long string, and sticking it under the chair. She brought the house down—people couldn't get enough."

Some say Rittenhouse inherited her stubborn streak from her father, who was known as a powerful presence on whatever campus he was teaching. Aalstrup took several classes in ancient history from George Shankel at AUC. "He was highly intellectual and yet he had a sense of humor," Aalstrup said. "His classes were always jam packed because he had so much experience and exposure to world events. But he was very conservative and always absolutely proper."

When she was ten years old, Rittenhouse's parents went home on furlough and the young Virginia-Gene gave her first public performance of her own compositions, which was broadcast on American radio. When

the family returned to Africa, they met a group of professional musicians on the boat who encouraged her to play for the University of Capetown's College of Music. So at age thirteen Rittenhouse won a scholarship for piano, violin, and composition.

Rittenhouse made her debut with the Capetown Symphony Orchestra at age fourteen, playing a Beethoven piano concerto, and six months later she made her violin debut. For five years, she was a frequent soloist, incredibly playing both violin and piano. She then won the prestigious London Associated Board Overseas Award, the top music award in the country.

She still tells the story with emotion in her voice, mainly because she feels her victory was such a witness. "I wouldn't travel on Sabbath, so I had to take the old slow train to Pretoria on Saturday night, while the other contestants took the fast train to get there in enough time to rehearse. I didn't get there until shortly before I had to go on stage and just had time to dash through my piece with the accompanist. My pro-



fessors were very angry—they said I had a great chance of winning and was giving it all up for nothing. I left the moment I finished because I didn't expect to win. I'd heard there was a brilliant pianist that morning and the judges had already made up their minds. Then I got word I had won. The head of the university came to me and apologized, telling me to keep my religion because it made me what I was."

Rittenhouse earned her bachelor's degree from the University of Washington in Seattle, studied at the world-famous Juilliard School in New York, and got a master's from Boston University and a doctorate from the renowned Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, Maryland. But despite living in the sphere of some of the greatest musicians and teachers in the world, she dedicated most of her energy to the church she loved so well.

Many people who have worked with Rittenhouse assert that she could have gone on to have a world-class career as a concert performer, but she gave that up to work with young people, training them to take the message of great music to people everywhere. "She gave up her career to give us all one," as Naomi Burns Delafield said.

Virginia-Gene Shankel met Harvey Rittenhouse at the first North American Division Youth Congress in San Francisco in 1947. "I was head of the orchestra and he was playing cello," Rittenhouse recalled. They were married in a fairytale wedding on October 22, 1950, with the bridesmaids in long dresses singing pieces composed by Rittenhouse for the occasion, with full orchestral accompaniment.

Three years later, the young couple moved to Jamaica along with the Shankels, when Rittenhouse's

The Rittenhouses spent a total of three years in Jamaica; then in 1961 they returned to Atlantic Union College in South Lancaster where they had lived in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In 1969, the New England Youth Ensemble was born, with "four little kids in the living room," as Rittenhouse said. The first performance was a Christmas program for the local Kiwanis club. "We thought these little kids, dressed up in cute Swiss costumes, would be amusing for the businessmen," Rittenhouse said. "But it turned out they were going out the door all choked up and so moved by these little kids playing Bach and Handel. I got my first glimpse of how inspiring young kids playing great music could be."

The first international tour was to France, England, and Scotland in 1973. The young orchestra traveled to Poland in 1974 and then back again in 1975, when they played in the presidential palace for visiting American president Gerald Ford. Thereafter, almost every year the orchestra has traveled on one major international tour and one major domestic tour, plus endless weekend tours and local performances.

They have played in some of the most prestigious cathedrals and concert halls in the world, including St. Martin-in-the-Fields and Salisbury Cathedral in England, the Sacre Coeur and Notre Dame in Paris, St. Mark's in Venice, Dom Cathedral in Salzburg, St. Patrick's in New York, the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., the Sydney Opera House in Australia, the Roman Amphitheater in Amman, Jordan, and of course at almost a hundred concerts at Carnegie Hall.

Rittenhouse always focuses on the positive. She tells

In Jamaica, ...she put together a small ensemble called the Cockroach Orchestra, in which some of the instruments were homemade.

father was asked to be the dean of the college there. Some of Rittenhouse's funniest stories come from her time in Jamaica, as she put together a small ensemble called the Cockroach Orchestra, in which some of the instruments were homemade. But the group traveled and raised money for the hospital in Jamaica where Harvey worked as a surgeon. Rittenhouse was inspired by Jamaican music and culture and she wrote the *Jamaican Suite* for violin and piano, which she has performed a number of times, most recently in October 2003 in Carnegie's recital hall.

stories about playing on Chinese television for 1.7 billion people and about the great honor of performing for Jordan's Queen Noor. She is masterful at leaving an impression of success, spinning or overlooking the negatives to create a flawless record of triumph. But Rittenhouse has certainly had her share of heartache and sorrow.

In 1976, the orchestra took its first tour to communist Russia. George Shankel, Rittenhouse's father, drove into Boston to take care of some paperwork for the ensemble. On the way home, he experienced a head-on collision and both drivers were killed. Alfred Aalstrup, dear friend of

the Rittenhouses and Shankels, was alerted by a police officer who was trying to locate the family. Aalstrup and his wife went and sat with Mrs. Shankel all night.

But together they decided not to inform Rittenhouse in Moscow. "We felt she needed to complete the tour she had worked so hard for. There was nothing she could do anyway," Aalstrup said. Rittenhouse wasn't told about the accident until the day after returning home, because her family wanted her to have the moment of triumph in the homecoming.

That wasn't the last heartbreak Rittenhouse had to

"Because of course our home was here."

Frank Araujo, who directed music at Takoma Park church and was a friend of Rittenhouse's, suggested she come to Washington, D.C. So in 1993 she began rehearsing with a small group of students and musicians in the basement of Takoma Park church, commuting back and forth eight hours between South Lancaster and Takoma Park every week.

"That was the lowest point," Rittenhouse said. "I thought the orchestra was at its end. We were kind of a motley group that first year, starting with a few young kids,

We thought these little kids...would be amusing...but it turned out...I got my first glimpse of how inspiring young kids playing great music could be.

get through. The following year, while on tour near Billings, Montana, the used motor home the Rittenhouses had recently purchased caught fire. Rittenhouse managed to crawl through the roof hatch, while Harvey got out through the windshield after being severely burned. He had been a wonderful cellist, but one arm became almost completely useless after the accident. The most tragic result of the accident, however, was that Mrs. Shankel, who was in her eighties, was killed. Rittenhouse was devastated. "I owe everything to her," she said.

There were difficult times with the orchestra, too. In the early 1990s, not long after the orchestra began playing in Carnegie Hall with MidAmerica Productions, Rittenhouse became embroiled in a messy political situation at AUC. She had lived near AUC for the better part of fifty years, dedicating her life to the orchestra she based on its campus. But as one musician who has worked with her for many years said: "Virginia-Gene is the kind of person who makes bureaucrats very nervous. She has always done her own thing and she is sort of out of control when it comes to institutions."

Rittenhouse was accused of racism and a terrible battle fraught with emotion ensued among students, teachers, and administrators, ending in Rittenhouse being asked not to return to the AUC campus. "The situation was out of control," one long-time orchestra member and student at AUC at the time, said. "It felt like a divorce in my family as I was good friends with and respected the administration and both sides of the music department. I went to PUC for my last two years." Other students left, too.

"It was devastating," Rittenhouse said.

but gradually more people heard about it and joined our weekly rehearsals. Columbia Union College [just down the road from the church] didn't have an orchestra, so when they asked whether I would join them, of course I said yes. Some of our greatest moments have come since then."

Rittenhouse continues to create great moments out of situations others dismiss as impossible. She inspires others with her vision and as more and more people get involved in a project, it takes on a momentum of its own and becomes inevitable. It is her gift for inspiring others that helps her ideas to become reality. Rittenhouse couldn't do it all by herself. She's had faithful people too numerous to name working with her over the years—people who stand behind her and find telephone numbers and help her pull her long black dress over her head just before walking on stage. Part of it is certainly a desire to be a part of the mission, but part of it is just Rittenhouse herself, pure and simple. The power of her personality makes people want to help her and win her approval, never mind the bigger picture.

Harvey Rittenhouse might be the most devoted of all. The word most commonly associated with him is "saint." He doesn't miss a tour. You won't hear him say much, but when he does speak you know immediately that he is an old school gentleman—the kind you just don't find anymore. He is quietly charming and helpful, limping along slightly lopsided, always with his wife's violin case in his good hand.

"Harvey is wonderful," Rittenhouse said. "He had



to give up surgery when his arm was injured, but he does all the driving, takes care of the treasury work for the orchestra, and is very much a part of it all. All the kids love him.”

“If she says get up at 6 o’clock and climb Mt. McKinley, Harvey will do it,” Aalstrup said.

Rittenhouse’s retirement has been a subject of continuing speculation over the last decade and more. But as Rittenhouse ages well into her eighties and as she becomes more stooped and bent, her unstoppable energy has only slightly abated.

Rutter recently asked whether she would be able to enjoy some peace and quiet this summer. “Well, I hope not!” Rittenhouse replied. A European tour is planned, with a visit to a summer string school in Austria. Next summer, Rittenhouse would like to take her oratorio to South Africa. And there is talk that it could be performed at the General Conference session in St. Louis in 2005.

“People did ask me for awhile whether I was going to retire, but the new story is that I can’t because they want their children to have this experience, too. I would like to quiet down a bit, but I haven’t figured out how to do that yet, so I’ll keep going while I have the strength. This has been my life—I can’t imagine life without the orchestra, really.”

Rittenhouse hopes that someday, when the time comes, the right person will agree to carry on the work she has dedicated her life to. Talk has floated around for years, maybe even before Rittenhouse left AUC, and quiet feelers have been extended to several people who might be capable of directing the orchestra when she lets it go. But everyone knows that trying to live up to her reputation and abilities is a mammoth, impossible task. And so far, Rittenhouse stubbornly hangs on to the orchestra she loves. Recently, she has agreed to help revive the orchestra at AUC and has the blessing of both colleges to spend one week at AUC, where she and Harvey still live, and the next week at CUC.

“She’s definitely getting older,” Cabey said. “She still has her vitality, but recently I’ve seen her acknowledge some physical limitations and that has never happened before.” But Cabey, who has probably played with the orchestra for more years than any other member, believes Rittenhouse has mellowed in her old age. “I knew her

when she was in her early fifties and she is a lot more fun now. You guys get away with stuff we would have been *killed* for. I think she’s gotten better with age, no question. Now seems to be her absolute best time.”

Certainly her wit, her energy, and her spirited sense of fun keep even the youngest orchestra members on their toes. Travis Losey, who played with the orchestra all through the 1990s and married violinist April Bellamy, remembers one Saturday night when the orchestra was sleeping in an Adventist community service center off the Long Island Expressway where they often stay before Carnegie performances. He woke up at 2 a.m. to the sound of shuffling around in the next room. Being a responsible soul, Losey worried that someone had broken in and was stealing from the luggage. “I snuck into the doorway,” he said, “to find Dr. Rittenhouse on her tiptoes trying to steal some leftover ice cream from the freezer without waking anyone.”

People might wonder what a woman who recently premiered her own composition at New York’s Carnegie Hall, played by her own orchestra, is doing still sleeping on the floors of community service centers. But no one who knows her can imagine Rittenhouse staying in the Ritz and ordering up room service. Rittenhouse hangs tight to her vision, with no frills attached. Her single-minded dedication to taking music to places other people would never even think to go is inspiring, and her vibrant presence works wonders in those around her. “The one or two occasions I have conducted the orchestra without [Rittenhouse], they do well but it is somehow not quite the same,” said Rutter. “I put it down to some kind of personal magic.”

Rittenhouse herself wouldn’t accept that magic is the secret of her success. She admits it helps that she can survive on four hours of sleep (this doesn’t include the short catnaps she more and more frequently indulges in, sometimes even while conducting), but she makes it clear that the real driving force behind her tireless dedication is the deep sense of mission integral to her sense of self. “I believe more deeply every day in the mission of music and what it can accomplish in young people’s lives and for the audience,” Rittenhouse said. “The mission makes me go on.”

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