



## Brown Makes Connections Through Variety and Energy

Houston is a large city with a diverse population and range of musical offerings, but it seems that everything musical in the city can be tied together with a simple three-word phrase. "Call Richard Brown" opens doors for musicians in the realms of both classical and jazz music.

Brown, of Local 65-699 (Houston, TX), started his career in Houston in 1980 as a percussionist with the Houston Symphony. He's since expanded his professional activities, to include working as drummer and bandleader for the Richard Brown Orchestra and setting up contracts for classical musicians in Houston-area churches and for other performing arts organizations. As Brown puts it, he's found a home "on both sides of the music fence."

As a student at Temple University in Philadelphia, Brown first joined the AFM in order to play concerts with the Philadelphia Lyric Opera and the Chamber Symphony of Philadelphia. He then spent three years in the US Army Band before winning the percussion audition with the Houston Symphony.

He took a detour from his career in Houston to spend several years in New York City playing on Broadway as a per-service musician, including performances in a revival of *West Side Story*. Brown later returned to Houston to head the percussion department at the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University. "I went

from the security of the symphony to the freelance world," Brown says. "After five or six years, security was back on the boards again, so I went for security." He's been at Shepherd since 1985, helping to build the school into one of the top programs in the US, and he attributes the program's success to finding the right mix of students.

"In addition to talent, I'm looking for the right personality," Brown says. "I want students who will be supportive of one another so that everyone gets along."

Brown is now principal percussionist for the Houston Grand Opera Orchestra, as well its personnel manager. His rapport with Houston-area musicians led him to work in contracting for churches and other classical music organizations. It was an unexpected turn for him, but his energy and organizational skills have made it into a solid side career.

"My forte is being able to put things together. With the classical contracting, it was nothing I was looking for. It was just word of mouth," he says.

In addition to his faculty position at Rice, his post with the opera's orchestra, and work as a contractor, Brown also leads

the Richard Brown Orchestra in all of its various formats—an eight-piece combo, a 17-piece big band, and a 27-piece jazz orchestra. "What I noticed in Houston was there was a niche to be filled," he says, regarding the orchestra's origins. For society events, balls, dances, and weddings, Brown and his orchestra have a diverse offering of styles: music of Glen Miller, Elvis, Frank Sinatra, even Motown and disco. "There's nobody else in Houston that can do that," Brown says.

He adds that he owes the band's existence and its success to the reputation he has built as both a player and a contractor. Regarding the musicians he contracts, Brown says, "They know that they can trust me, and they know they have my respect."



**Richard Brown of Local 65-699 (Houston, TX) has built a strong reputation as both a player and contractor, with connections to musicians in both the classical and popular worlds. He is principal percussionist for the Houston Grand Opera Orchestra and leads the Richard Brown Orchestra.**

It adds up to what seems to be an incredible amount of work, but Brown continues to take it all in stride. "I was born with a lot of energy," he says. "It doesn't feel overwhelming or overpowering right now."

Brown enjoys a close relationship with Local 65-699 and with the local's Secretary-Treasurer Bob McGrew, and his contract work has helped to bring new members into the Houston local. "All the jobs I do are union jobs. I think I've brought a lot of people to the Houston local," Brown says.

Recently, he worked with McGrew to set up a collective bargaining agreement for the Alley Theatre, a longtime Houston performance venue. He also encourages his students at the Shepherd School to join the union.

To his students, Brown stresses variety and versatility. They're starting points for his students' careers, as well as factors in his own longevity. "A student says 'I just want to be a timpanist', and I tell them there's only one in any orchestra," Brown says, "or there's someone who wants to be a marimba soloist, and how many of those are there? Knowing how to do many different things is key."