

Who We Are: Len Rhodes ‘does what he does’

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At the age of 13, Len Rhodes landed his first gig doing what he loved: playing the organ for his church.

Forty-seven years later, he’s stilling doing it.

Continuing a career driven by his love of music, Rhodes, a pianist and composer, is now the organist at Lord of the Mountains Church in Dillon, among his many other pursuits.

Rhodes’ storied career has been one defined by his unfettered creativity and constant pursuit of new opportunities.

“Len does what he does,” Rhode’s wife, Sandy, said. “Wherever he is he creates opportunities not only for himself, but for other people.”

Over the years he taught piano lessons, started a theater company and founded a non-profit called Pikes Peak Young Composers, which is dedicated to giving young musicians from all over the world their start.

For the last five years, Rhodes has been doing what he does in Summit County, as a board member of the Breckenridge Music Festival and the artistic director for the arts association, heading up the Chamber Music Series for the last three winters. He also teaches music at Summit High School.

Born and raised in London at the height of the rock-and-roll era, Rhodes’ love of music began and remained with the piano. His mother began teaching him to play at the age of 2. By 4 he was taking private lessons, and at 13 he was composing, performing and teaching others.

“That’s what I did,” Rhodes said of his school years. “It was totally my focus. I played soccer and cricket, but music was my focus.”

As a young adult, Rhodes dove into a music scene that was exploding around him with the creative talent of The Beatles, Rolling Stones, David Bowie and Peter Frampton.

“The British invasion here started over there,” Rhodes says of his youth in the ’60s and ’70s in England. “It was a very exciting time to be involved in music. I remember if there was any song played on the radio that had any sort of significant piano in it, the kids at school would expect me to have it memorized so I could play it for them. And I did.”

Though he was coming-of-age in a historic time for rock ‘n’ roll, which he says he liked, Rhodes remained loyal to classical music. He received degrees from the Royal Academy of Music and the London College of Music before going on to study composition at the University of London.

After finishing his academic work, he took the natural next step into the world of performing, recording and composing.

He worked as a studio musician and began arranging for “various people,” he says vaguely, preferring not to drop names.

In 1982, at the age of 30, Rhodes decided to migrate to the United States. He landed in Houston, where he became involved in the theater, both playing for shows and arranging music. It was a full-time job, rehearsing during the day and performing at night for the theater’s productions of “The Rocky Horror Picture Show” and “Beehive.”

But he found time to sign on as a pianist director for a trio of singers – one of whom was Sandy. The two married in 1985.

Five years later, with his father’s health failing, the couple returned to England where they made their home in a 500-year-old cottage just outside the city.

There, Rhodes’ passion for music landed him a job with the British Broadcasting Company producing its choir girl of the year competition, pushed him to establish a theater company and took him to a benefit where he performed for the royal family.

In 1990, he returned to the United States and took a job as coordinator for the Trinity College of London, and settled in Colorado, which they said seemed like a good place to raise their children. It was while living in Colorado Springs in the mid-1990s, that Len established Pikes Peak Young Composers.

Like teaching music, composing is a passion that has followed Rhodes all his life, he said. His first pieces of music were written when he was a young adult, growing out of his earlier affinity for improvisation.

“The natural progression from my earliest days of improvisation was to start writing things,” Rhodes said. “Fast forward 40 years, one of the reasons I started Pikes Peak Young Composers was to encourage young people to start writing things down, to start recording.”

The organization started as a regional competition. Today, it receives major orchestral works from students across the country and all over the world, and provides education, evaluation and performance opportunities for young composers.

“I went through years and years of teaching, realizing that kids were losing that ability, or were never really encouraged to develop that ability,” Rhodes said. “I also had some students who were writing music, and they wanted more than just my evaluation.”

Still a composer in his own right, Rhodes says he draws inspirations from everyone from his classical favorites, including Johann Sebastian Bach, Claude Debussy and Oliver Messiaen – who studied with one of his college professors – to his contemporaries, such as The Beatles.

“I listen to everything,” Rhodes said. “I utilize any and every element of my background and experience.”

Over the last few years, he has accumulated a collection of original work. His still-busy work schedule, which has landed him on stage with performers ranging from Mike Tyson to Liza Minnelli to Leon Joseph Littlebird, has prevented him from recording much lately, but he said it’s at the top of the list for the coming year.

“It’s been really busy, so I’m ready to take a deep breath and stay home and write and record some ideas,” Rhodes said.