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Maestro Kenneth Woods' Swan Song

Seven years after moving to Wales, Kenneth Woods conducts the Oregon East Symphony in his farewell performance

By [KATHY ANEY](#)

The East Oregonian

Conductor Kenneth Woods lives for those moments when he and his orchestra slip into a musical realm beyond tempo and timbre into something almost spiritual.

"You can't make it happen," Woods said, "but when it does, it's the ultimate thrill ride."

Occasionally, he finds himself conducting with tears in his eyes. He's had plenty of those in-the-zone moments as maestro of the Oregon East Symphony and may find himself in that place again Saturday as he waves his baton in Pendleton one final time.

Woods didn't quit OES when he resigned as Eastern Oregon University professor and moved to Wales with his wife in 2002. Though his home in Cardiff is 5,000 miles from Pendleton, he returned regularly to Oregon for a flurry of back-to-back rehearsals ending in a performance. He racks up so many thousands of air miles that he knows many airline personnel by name.

The crazy commuting schedule isn't the reason he's saying goodbye to OES. Rather, the move stems from the fact his wife, violinist Suzanne Casey, gave birth to their first child last year.

"I want something for Sam that more closely resembles a normal life," Woods said.



The break with the Pendleton symphony doesn't mean Woods will be a homebody. In 2010, he begins his position as principal guest conductor of the Stratford-upon-Avon virtuoso ensemble, Orchestra of the Swan. Over the years, he has worked with the National Symphony Orchestra, the Cincinnati Symphony, the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, the Budapest Festival Orchestra and others.

It's a lofty rise from the days when, as a toddler, Woods found musical pleasure from banging pot lids together. Eventually, he traded pots and pans for the piano and the cello. As a teenager, he discovered Jimi Hendrix and bought a guitar. In the years following, Woods played with several "killer" rock bands.

His favorite, an acid-funk ensemble called Watchmen, created a complex blend of music that blended modern jazz harmonies, the ghost of Hendrix, dance groove and an acid rock vibe.

"We were very edgy, very funky, very out-there," Woods recalls.

Eventually, he found his way back to classical music and began conducting. A big break came in 1997 when he got a chance to direct an opera after the regular conductor, Gerhard Samuel, asked him to step in for him for one performance of Britten's "Albert Herring" at the College-Conservatory of Music.

www.kennethwoods.net

"He called me in the morning and said, 'I'm a little tired. Would you conduct the matinee performance?'" Woods said. "No one realized that was the performance the critic was going to."

After initial excitement, terror washed over him at the prospect. Afterwards, the infamously tough Cincinnati Enquirer critic wrote about the opera and Woods' direction. To Woods' great relief, the reviewer praised him.

Pendleton has provided a whole different set of challenges and rewards.

One example was the group's performance of "Symphony No. 2" by Mahler. The production required off-stage horns and a backstage television monitor.

"Fifteen brass players huddled in one of the alcoves backstage," Woods said. "They were crammed in there with barely enough room to stand."

As they played, the musicians watched Woods in the monitor as he directed from onstage.

Other challenges over the years have included an ice storm that prevented musicians (about a third of the orchestra) from coming over the pass from La Grande.

Another concert, which featured Copland's "Appalachian Spring" and Hindemith's "Der Schwanendreher," was "a program that would make the most formidable big-city orchestra gulp."

Hindemith was modern and not well known, so Woods wondered how the Pendleton patrons would respond. After the performance, he was smiling.

"They went berserk for the Hindemith," he said.

As his last OES concert approaches, Woods is jazzed. One of the pieces, Mozart's "Symphony No. 31 in D major" (known as the Paris Symphony), is the first piece he ever conducted with OES.

"It felt right to come full circle," Woods said.

Pianist James Dick is featured in Mozart's "Piano Concerto in A major." Woods witnessed Dick playing the concerto years ago.

"He gave the greatest performance of this piece I ever heard," Woods said. "It's an exceptionally beautiful slow movement ... that brings you to tears."

The last piece is Schumann's "Symphony No. 2 in C major," which is in the running for Woods' all-time favorite orchestral work and was written when the German composer had become seriously ill.

"It's a piece that is all about hope and love and those things that keep us going – it's profoundly optimistic," he said. "It's a reminder to keep on trucking."

And that's just what Woods plans on doing when he lays down his OES baton for the last time. He won't miss the travel, he said, but he'll never forget the people.

And the people won't forget him.