

3-Octave Wonder

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With a CD & an
International
Championship
Steve Herbst
Wants to Put
Whistling
on the Map



In the realm of a lost art, Steve Herbst is king.

The Upper East Side resident and ad executive has elevated the common whistle to an art form. While most people are lucky to nail a few notes, Herbst has mastered a three-octave whistling range; his rendition of Franz Liszt's "Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2" clinched the 2002 International Grand Championship at the International Whistlers Convention this April in Lewisburg, NC.

"We want to get people aware of what whistling really can be," Herbst said. "Almost every time I perform somewhere, I watch people's faces move from skepticism [and] mirth to appreciation and to perhaps even being in awe of what it can be."

To that end, Herbst recently released his first CD, "Broadway and Beyond." On it, Herbst tackles songs from "Les Miz" and "Phantom of the Opera" as well as his signature tune, "Danny Boy."

Whistlers, Herbst explains, fall under two categories: bird whistlers, who perform songs while trying to mimic the sound of a warbling bird, and instrumental whistlers, who try to achieve the sound of an instrument.

Herbst performs the latter.

"The people ...they say they hear singing in my whistling. They say it sounds like an instrument," he said. "They might say a flute, they might say a violin; I've been compared to a musical saw, I've been compared to a Theremin."

To achieve such a sound, a whistler must learn to transcend the average trill. Professional whistlers blow in as well as out, use lip balm to prevent chapping and

drink plenty of fluids before a performance because they "don't want to go out on the stage and dry up."

In competitive whistling, the difficulty of the piece is as important as the sound. At the championship, whistlers compete in two categories: classical and popular songs. It took Herbst a year to learn his award-winning "Hungarian Rhapsody"; he chose "Danny Boy" for the popular category.

"Kind of like high diving, you have to take the judges' point of view into account -- what are they going to consider competitive and degree of difficulty," Herbst said. "What it calls for in terms of range and stamina and precision are critical."

Once just a whistler in a university glee club, Herbst thought his talent unique to him alone. Then a high school friend told him about a whistler from the International Whistlers Convention interviewed on National Public Radio.

Herbst did a bit of research and began competing in the mid-1990s. In this year's competition, the 29th annual, Herbst brought the title back to New York by beating out a group of 23 other men who traveled from as far as India. Seven women also took part in a women's whistling contest. The first New Yorker to win, Arnie Solomon, took home the title in 1978.

Though Herbst won a trophy and a small cash prize in the championship, he is looking for something bigger. He hopes he can parlay the victory and the new CD into a professional career.

"Most of the whistlers with whom I've been competing over the years are not trying to do anything with it professionally," he said.

Herbst, who is also a singer, would like symphony and pop orchestras to consider featuring whistlers in their programs. And that P.C. Richard & Son jingle? He'd love to whistle in commercials and soundtracks. If his first CD does well, Herbst would also like to record albums in other genres, from blues to classical.

Until then, he'll continue to surprise those who cross his whistling path.

Steve Herbst's CD, "Broadway and Beyond," is available exclusively on his website, stevehewhistler.com. For more information on the International Whistlers Convention, visit whistlingiwc.com.