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You might have called it a French horn in high school band, but serious horn players call it The Horn.

And when they miss a note, or hit a bad one - known as a crack note - it's called a clam. It happens, even in the finest orchestras, because the horn is a notoriously difficult instrument to play.

So it attracts a certain kind of person.

Five of those certain kinds of people make up the horn section of the Suburban Symphony Orchestra, and they point to the challenges of the horn as one reason they've been close friends for going on two decades.

"You have to be a little crazy to play the horn because it's very easy to miss a note and sometimes you can't recover from it," says Susan Allen of Shaker Heights.

"And it's better to be crazy together than by yourself," chimes in Ethel Epstein. "We also hold ourselves up a little because it's such a difficult instrument - other instruments are more forgiving."

At 87, Epstein is the oldest member of the group and a founding member of the Suburban Symphony in 1956. Connie Roop, 45, is the youngest member of "the horns." Allen, 49, plays first horn and in her 20s played on tour professionally. Harlan Meinwald, 53, and Richard Polster, 61, complete the group.

"We've been the horn section since 1988," says Polster of Beachwood. And they rise to the occasion - pushing themselves instrumentally. For example, they've performed the Schumann Concertstuecke for Four Horns, rehearsing it once a week for six months. (Epstein usually plays an assisting role to Meinwald, who plays the lowest notes.)

"It's not a piece that avocational horn players would normally play, but we pulled it off," says Allen.

The Suburban Symphony is a community orchestra, made up of amateur musicians who love making orchestral music - and are pretty good at it. They are people who for one reason or another weren't destined for professional music careers, so they put their musical passion to work here. This orchestra has 70 to 75 members, and it performs many of the same works that the Cleveland Orchestra performs. Martin Kessler, their musical director, has degrees in conducting and composition and is a director of music at University School's Upper Campus.

But it's not just about the music for the five horns. "It seems we have a similarly unique sense of humor," says Meinwald, who lives in South Euclid.

As a result, the five horns often serve as the entertainment committee for official Suburban Symphony functions. They're known for their sendups of musicals, performing riffs of such classics as "Fiddler on the Roof," which they refer to as "Fiddler Made a Goof."

The horns have been there for each other in tough times, too. When Polster's daughter was ill and hospitalized in intensive care, the four

other horns brought him and his family soup, salad and support. His daughter recovered, and when she got married a few years later, Polster's four horn-friends flew to Phoenix for her wedding.

"She said, 'You can invite the four horns as long as they don't play,' " quips Polster.

The horns are tricksters, too. When Polster turned 50 in 1995, they showed up outside his home at 2 a.m. and put up posters, saying things like "It ain't nifty turning 50, just ask Polster, with his empty holster."

They all have other lives, of course. Meinwald is the group's unofficial chef, who is best-known for his elaborate Chinese New Year dinners; he's in product development at Nestle, and has worked on product lines including Lean Cuisine. Epstein, the group's momlike mentor, just retired from John Carroll University, where she was a secretary; she lives in University Heights. Polster, a prankster who also is a financial adviser to the horns and the orchestra "because I'm really cheap," works in promotional product sales.

Roop of Cleveland Heights is affectionately known as the horns' drama queen; she's a fifth-grade teacher at Audubon school in Cleveland. Allen, a graduate of the Cleveland Institute of Music, is a Laurel School field hockey-lacrosse mom. Her SUV license plate says "NO CLAMS."

"She could play professionally," says Polster. "So she gives us credibility," adds Meinwald.

Meinwald is the most unflappable of the group. He was a few minutes late for rehearsal once, which was unusual, then came in, a little sweaty, as if he'd been running. "Where were you?" the other horns asked him. "My wife just had a baby," he said.

Roop was single until last year, when she married Jim Roop. The other horns are longtime "marrieds," whose spouses understand their need for practice and entertainment.

"Jim had to get past the horns, or the marriage wouldn't have happened," says Roop. "Soon after we started dating, I had the horns over for dinner." They gave him a thumbs up.

Yes, these horns have a lot of fun - one of their other favorite sayings, besides "no clams," is "spit happens." They also share a lot of respect for the music they play. When they practice in one of the group's living rooms, the sound, barring the occasional clam, is smooth and euphonious.

They also have a dream they're working on - to bring 1,000 or so other horn players to Cleveland for a meeting of the International Horn Society.

This group just might pull it off. If not, they'll just keep enjoying the music, and each other's company.