

# Trumpeting the joy of toys

**O**NLY ON the clearest of days from the panoramic deck of his Oakland hills home can Phil Shoptaugh make out five bridges — the Dumbarton, San Mateo, Bay, Golden Gate and the Richmond-San Rafael.

But that's not where his vision ends. Shoptaugh is a classical musician as well as the inventor of parlor games and construction toys. It's "Toy Story" meets Beethoven.

Shoptaugh, 70, was trained on the trumpet and played with the San Francisco Symphony and various theater orchestras. He now plays with Brazzissimo, a 10-piece brass ensemble he founded and directs. And he's lead coronet in the Oakland Park Band.

He wasn't trained as an inventor of games and toys. That just sort of happened as an adult, and he's made a living doing it since — and doing it tastefully. He has received two prestigious national honors: the Parents Choice Award and Creative Child Award.

He was born in Oakland, then moved around the East Bay, graduating from Acalanes High School in Lafayette. His father was a printer who published the Piedmonter and Piedmont Avenue Bulletin. As a teenager, Shoptaugh was a linotype operator.

But music, not newspapering, was in his blood. So he went on a 10-week national tour with Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops, playing 71 symphony engagements.



**DAVE NEWHOUSE**  
Good Neighbors

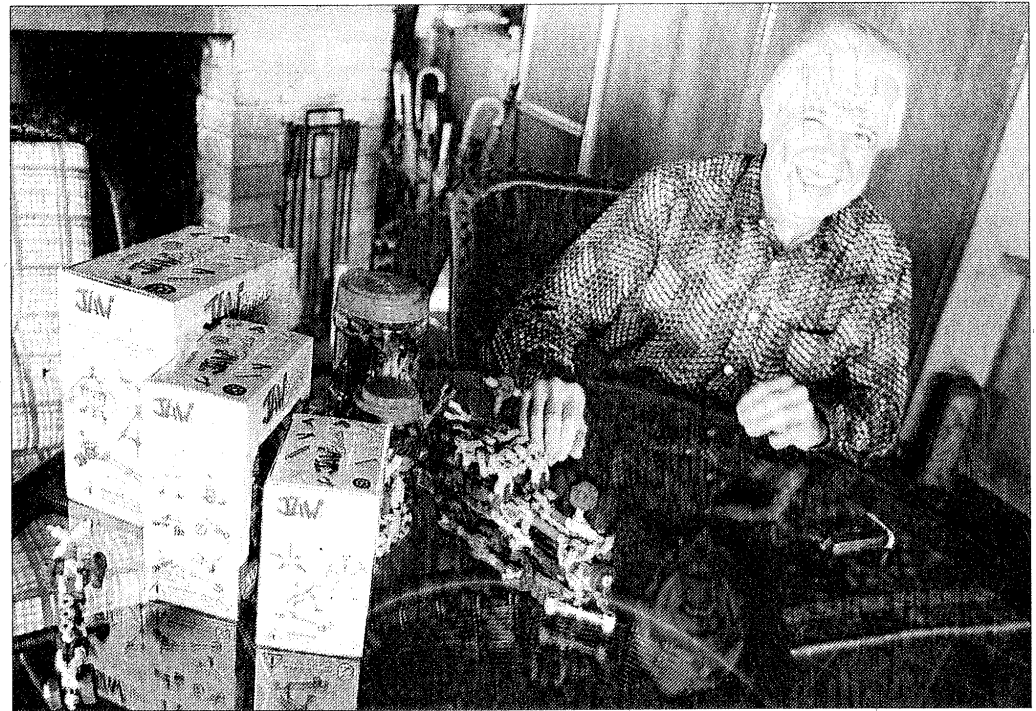
Shoptaugh studied at The Julliard School and won a competition against 54 trumpet players to earn a scholarship to Tanglewood, where he played under another famous conductor — Eugene Ormandy.

Combining his theater involvement with classical music, Shoptaugh played an amazing 500 engagements in one year. He continued playing the trumpet actively in San Francisco musicals — he was lead trumpet for Lauren Bacall in "Applause" — until 1985.

Then toys took over his life — in the orchestra pit.

"I always built things," he said, "but when I played in the theater, there are long spots in the show's dialogue when you have time. Some musicians would read books. But I learned to play chess, and that's when I decided to invent my own games."

Thus, in the early 1970s, Shoptaugh invented four games, which he subsequently took into the pit and played against other musicians while



LAURA A. ODA/STAFF

**PHIL SHOPTAUGH**, at his home in Oakland on Monday morning, shows some of his latest construction toys selling in toy stores across the nation. Shoptaugh is a classical musician who has made a life of inventing and copyrighting games and construction toys.

the fiddler fiddled on his roof.

Shoptaugh calls his games "skill logic games. They're strategy games, not games of chance. No throwing dice, no drawing cards, not a conventional board game like 'Monopoly.'"

Perhaps you've played some of his games — "Shuttles" or "Interplay" or "Calypso."

For a long time, he kept rejection letters from major game companies in a file at home. Then in the 1980s, he formed his own company — Shoptaugh Games. This involves making trips to Hong Kong to market his games

and toys.

He expanded the company early on to increase the range of his games, including chess, checkers and cribbage, using his own creativity. He doesn't sell directly to stores; he uses distributors for that.

Then, five years ago, he got into construction toys.

"You can't make a child play with a toy for very long," he said of that endeavor. "You have to have confidence in what you're making. You've got to keep going."

Possibly you bought his "Jaw Bones 100 Piece Construction Set" for a child. The Parents Choice Award came

from that.

"The beautiful thing about music is that it's in the moment; the payoff is immediate," he said. "I worked on a construction toy five years, and the payoff is finally coming."

Well, vision can be nearsighted or farsighted, either in distance or time.

*Dave Newhouse's columns appear Monday, Thursday and Sunday, usually on the Metro page. Know any Good Neighbors? Call 510-208-6466 or e-mail [dnewhouse@bayareanewsgroup.com](mailto:dnewhouse@bayareanewsgroup.com).*