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The New York Youth Symphony Celebrates Its 50th Anniversary

Itzhak Perlman made his Carnegie Hall debut with the NYYS. So did Alisa Weilerstein. Now this first-rate music-education program marks a milestone

By [Corinne Ramey](#) posted March 2013 ★★★★★



photo: Courtesy New York Youth Symphony

It's a Sunday afternoon in October, and the New York Youth Symphony is rehearsing a movement from Dvorak's Symphony No. 9, "From the New World." The orchestra sounds good—the music is rhythmically tight, intonation is generally accurate, and energy is high—but music director Joshua Gersen just isn't satisfied.

There's an important second flute solo, and he wants the violins to play a softer tremolo. "You're literally like ghosts haunting the walls," he says.

The violinists play a little quieter.

Gersen, wearing an untucked button-down shirt and jeans, tries again.

"Better. But there are three p's. I know that's a lot of them, but he means it," he says, referring to the composer's instruction to play pianississimo.

The sound grows a bit softer, but Gersen still looks unsatisfied.

Finally he squats down, while continuing to conduct. “I’m literally underneath the stand!” he says, arms waving.

Suddenly, the violinists’ unbridled enthusiasm turns into sensitive playing.

Gersen can be demanding, because this is no ordinary youth orchestra. The New York Youth Symphony, which celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, is not only an orchestra, but also a first-rate music-education program, including composition, conducting, and chamber-music programs as well as a jazz band. The orchestra draws students ages 12 to 22 from New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut, although it has had members from as far away as Boston and Baltimore. Most of the string players are high school students and about half of the winds and brass are in college. The ensemble regularly plays new music, having commissioned more than 100 new works since 1984 from young composers. Participation is tuition-free, although each program has a registration fee.

The orchestra plays with energy and conviction, musicality, and a much more polished sound than most youth orchestras. They regularly play concerts in Carnegie Hall that get reviewed by the New York Times. “The New York Youth Symphony’s sound may not have had the polish of a professional orchestra, but Mr. McAdams [conductor Ryan McAdams] drew vivid, colorful, and often incisive playing from the young musicians,” wrote New York Times critic Anthony Tommasini, of performance of a Mahler symphony last March. “The finale balanced episodes of hurtling power with passages of delicacy and grace.”

A highlight of the orchestra’s 50th anniversary season was a November 25 concert at Carnegie Hall featuring a concerto for four violins by Leonard Mauerer, titled *Sinfonia Concertante*. The four violin soloists showcased several generations of the program’s past and present members: Cho-Liang Lin, 52, is a former concertmaster, and Michelle Kim, 40, assistant concertmaster of the New York Philharmonic (she is not an NYYS alum). Samuel Katz, 19, is the NYYS co-concertmaster and Alice Ivy-Pemberton, 15, is in the chamber-music program.

Gersen, who is 28, conducted.

The orchestra has historically had young conductors, including Leonard Slatkin, David Alan Miller, and, most recently, McAdams. Most stay about three to five years, and then it’s time again for new, younger blood. “He [conductor Myung-Whun Chung] was new, everyone was new,” says Lin, the violinist, who was concertmaster of the orchestra under Chung during the 1976–77 season. “There was a certain freshness and eagerness about the whole experience.”

More Than a Training Ground

That freshness is still there. On that Sunday afternoon, the orchestra began rehearsal with two movements of Dvorak at the DiMenna Center, a rehearsal and performance space in

midtown Manhattan. An orchestra of 100 sat in front of conductor Gersen's podium. Six young conducting students sat in the back, scores in front of them and pencils in hand, their heads bobbing with the beat. On the other side was a recruiter from USC's Thornton School of Music, lanyards and bags ready to hand out at break.

The playing level was consistently high. While intonation wasn't perfect, it was consistently good. Rhythm wasn't an issue. Even the backs of the string sections were engaged, playing all the notes. It was early in the season, but everyone appeared to have learned their parts. There was no chatting in the rests, and the young musicians actually stopped playing when Gersen stopped conducting.

Before the rehearsal, Gersen, in his first season as music director, was clearly exhausted. He had flown in from Miami that morning, where he is assistant conductor of the New World Symphony—five minutes before the rehearsal, he was inhaling a chicken panini. "I've found my approach has been to not treat them like students, and no different than when I go to New World and rehearse them," says Gersen, who the students call by his nickname, J.D. "I think they rise to the occasion."

In the rehearsal, it was like Gersen had flipped a switch, literally dancing around the podium. Much of his conducting is about energy and large gestures, not little details. He smiles when he hears something he likes, or sections that he finds particularly special. He's also relentlessly positive, while still demanding. "It's never going to be perfect," Gersen tells the orchestra. "But that isn't the idea. So we need not only 100 percent energy, but 100 percent concentration."

The orchestra is not only a training ground for young musicians, but for soloists as well. At the orchestra's first concert, in 1963, violinist Itzhak Perlman, then 18, made his Carnegie Hall debut with the orchestra. More recently, in 1997, cellist Alisa Weilerstein made her Carnegie Hall debut with the ensemble, performing Dvorak's cello concerto.

"For me, it was like a pinnacle, because it had always been my dream to play Dvorak with an orchestra," she says. "It was such a thrill, and fantastic to rehearse with them."

It's significant, too, that they play in Carnegie Hall, says Lin, the alum violinist. "The idea of going on that stage, and to experience the beauty and the incredible moment when you realize, yes, I am on the Carnegie Hall stage," says Lin. "That's a defining moment for a lot of players."

A Supportive Environment

At the break halfway through rehearsal, several students gather to reflect on their time in the orchestra. "It's the best!" says violinist Emma Hathaway, a bubbly 17-year-old who lives in New Jersey. "You play in other youth orchestras, and it just doesn't even compare."

Current concertmaster Samuel Katz has been in the orchestra since the age of 12, and is now a student at the Juilliard School. “One thing that’s consistent about the New York Youth Symphony is the spirit,” he says. “Every single person wants to be here and wants to improve the ensemble. The music making is always of a professional standard.”

The students list off some their favorite concerts. Hathaway loved playing with Hahn-Bin (who recently changed his name to Amadeus Leopold). Sam Zagnit, a 16-year-old bassist from Brooklyn, liked a commission by Chris Rogerson called “That Blue Repair,” with cellist Jay Campbell. Bartók’s Concerto for Orchestra was “really great,” says Zagnit, adding that it’s been exciting to play so many Mahler symphonies. He’s also glad to have played orchestra standards like Strauss’ Don Juan, so when he gets to the excerpts they’re not such a big deal.

Violinist Joseph Morag’s favorite memory is from one of the orchestra’s rehearsal-intensive kickoff weekends. “When I was 13, we were playing Ravel’s Daphnis and Chloé,” says Morag, who is now 16. “We’re sitting in this room with a bunch of windows, and it’s pretty cloudy, and we get to the part where the sun is supposed to come out, and it does.

“It was just the greatest thing.”

The conversation turns to leadership. Hathaway, who is now principal second violinist, confesses to have been watching Katz for the past two years. Then, Katz, the concertmaster, turns to Zagnit, the bassist, who is sitting principal for the first time.

“Great leading today,” the violinist says. “I just noticed it today, and it was really good.”

The New York Youth Symphony, joined by pianist Gary Graffman, will perform the McCrindle Concert March 24 at Carnegie Hall in New York.