

DC Youth Orchestra Program

Music for Young People, Achievement for Life!

BY HEATHER SCHOELL



There is an implication surrounding classical music, a tacit understanding that the beauty of it is reserved for the well educated and privileged. The DC Youth Orchestra Program (DCYOP) has challenged this notion since its inception in 1960; all children have the right to music. This is an exciting opportunity for young people to become accomplished musicians – the kind of program that makes you wonder why no one told you about it before!

The Success of Children

Ava Spece, executive director of the DC Youth Orchestra Program, makes one thing clear, “The program is about the success of children.” As she said in her March 2009 speech to the chair of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), “... in the last four years, 100 percent of the students who graduated from the DCYOP also graduated from high school. By contrast ... the graduation rate in DC public schools was 57.6 percent, while the national average is 70.6 percent.” Again, that is 100 percent of their students for the last four years. Further, 90 percent of their alumni attend college.

“It’s awesome, and it’s growing,” said Elizabeth, a fourth-year oboe student.

Lina, who has played viola with DCYOP for nine years, said, “With the NEA, the White House, there is

more recognition this program really deserves.” Kai began with DCYOP at 4 years old, a little guy with a tiny violin. Thirteen years later, he’s a veteran. Kai met Laura Bush at the White House a few years ago, and has already played for the new first family.

Location, Location

“The program is actively looking for a new spot,” Spece admitted. The building looks to be in disrepair; especially shabby is the auditorium where the senior orchestra plays. They have been housed at Coolidge High School (6315 Fifth St. NW) for the duration, but every year is more discouraging, and their future there is uncertain. “Coolidge is not conducive to what we’re trying to achieve ... We need a home, and the Hill would be a fabulous place to be, but we need a home, regardless.”

Ward 6 Councilmember Tommy Wells, a DCYOP board member, is looking to Capitol Hill as their new home. “I would love to get them on to the Hill at one of our middle schools or the high school if at all possible,” Wells said in an e-mail. “Eastern would be a great site for them because it is near a Metro, has a great performance auditorium, and is located near Wards 7 and 8.”

Life Lessons

Claudine Nash began her journey with DCYOP as an eighth-grader in 1971 (now their string coach) and has experienced world history with DCYOP and her double bass. She was awakened in Scotland to watch Nixon’s resignation on the telly. She was in Yugoslavia – along with Checkpoint Charlie – when the air traffic controller strike caused her to miss her flight home.

Denna Purdie, an alum and a DCYOP string coach as well, was right there with Nash, traveling with the orchestra to Japan, Greece, Germany and so many other places in the world. “There is so much more to music than notes,” said Purdie.

“We teach them to evoke emotion ... what was going on in the world at the time the music was writ-

ten,” Nash explained. “The music has to be developed, nurtured.”

DCYOP teaches instrument instruction and music theory, but it also teaches partnership. “We know that DCPS is working very hard to affect change,” said Spece of the chancellor’s offering of music instruction in DC schools. “Music instruction is crucial.” However, most schools offer one class of music instruction, which may or may not include instruments and ensemble training. “Sitting in [music] class is not the same as being part of an ensemble – part of a larger piece,” said Spece. “Ensemble pieces teach students how to work together, building skills as they make music.”

The regular DCYOP training reaches about 600 kids per year. “Many kids come having never touched an instrument,” said Spece. “We don’t turn anybody away.”

Accomplishment

Students advance based upon skill level, not by age. Levels I and J make up the Junior Philharmonic. Levels K and L perform for the DC Youth Orchestra, which has performed at the Kennedy Center and in April at the White House Easter Egg Roll. “We got the call to do it a week before. We had parents change plans and plane tickets to be there – no way were they going to miss it,” Spece said of her dedicated families. DCYOP has played for every administration since Jackie O asked them over.

The program has over 800 instruments for students to rent at a reduced rate, and they offer “petting zoos” during which children can browse the choices, be drawn by their instrument of choice. Sabrina Crutchfield heard about one of these petting zoos from a friend. That was six years ago – her daughter, Ayana, has played violin ever since. Adia, with whom Ayana went to preschool, joined DCYOP with her. Adia’s mom, Celeste Robinson, said of the program, “The students develop strength through performances and juries. Adia has developed a lot of confidence.”

Sam Agger couldn’t wait to tout the program. He’s the enthusiastic parent of an alumna – Rose graduated from the program in 2005 on cello, and now his sixth-grade son, Joe, is in it playing base. “Everything



FROM TOP TO BOTTOM:

Kai at Saturday orchestra practice. Photos by Heather Schoell.

The youth orchestra at the White House Easter Egg Roll.

Cameron Coachman, his first day on the cello at the “petting zoo.”

Beginning-level violin students at their first concert performance. Photos courtesy of DCYOP.

about it is wonderful," he said. "It's worth the commute, it's worth the Saturdays."

Making a Difference

There can be no argument against music instruction – that it enhances academic learning is irrefutable. DC's offering of music in schools is a great step to enlightenment, but it can't match the breadth of quality instruction given by the accomplished faculty of DCYOP, with small groups and ensemble training.

DCYOP sends faculty to DC schools, and through DC's budget, funds outreach for Wards 6, 7 and 8. "DCYOP has forged a relationship with [DC Department of Parks and Recreation] to use their facilities," Spece explained. Currently, fourth- and fifth-graders are offered violin classes at Kenilworth-Parkside Recreation Center (Ward 7) and King Greenleaf Recreation Center (Ward 6) and recorder at Fort Stanton Community Center (Ward 8). "We will always do outreach – it's just a matter of finding funds," she said.

To promote or facilitate this worthy organization, wear their t-shirt or buy them as DC-centric gifts. Volunteer your skills, or make a tax-deductible online donation. You can even book them for your next event! To learn more about how you can help, or to learn about affording your child the opportunities of playing classical music, please visit www.dcyop.org.

Their summer program runs June 29 to Aug. 7. Registration forms are on the DCYOP website. A petting zoo is scheduled for Sept. 12, 9 a.m. to noon, in the gym at Coolidge. It is free and open to the public. All interested students ages 4½ and up are welcome.

This is part of a monthly series profiling nonprofits that serve our community. To suggest an organization to be profiled, please e-mail Heather Schoell at hschoell@verizon.net with "suggestion" in the subject line. ★




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