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Music to the maestro's ears



Photographs courtesy of the D.C. Youth Orchestra Longtime D.C. Youth Orchestra maestro Lyn McLain (right) joined his successor, Jesus Manuel Berard, at a post-concert reception at the Kennedy Center.

Sometimes a bit of cacophony in the morning can result in some really fine music at the end of the day. Such is the case with the D.C. Youth Orchestra, which celebrated longtime conductor Lyn McLain with a tribute concert on Sunday performed by current and former members of the orchestra at the Kennedy Center's Concert Hall.

Executive Director Ava Spece used the occasion to announce the appointment of a new permanent conductor, Jesus Manuel Berard. (Mr. McLain stepped down last year for health reasons after 46 years at the podium.) While the baton may have been passed to the next generation, the event's spirit paid tribute to the past as generations of former program participants clamored for photographs with "Maestro McLain."

"Some called him terrifying — I called it love," said YaaNsia Opare-Phillips, a violist who graduated in 1994 but returned to play for Mr. McLain. "I've made lifelong friends in this program."

Co-chairs Angela Avant of KPMG and Rodney Slater, a former secretary of transportation now with the Patton Boggs law firm, and emcee Jennifer Cover Payne reminded the audience of the power of the DCYO program, which will teach any student willing to make a commitment to music making.

"The D.C. Youth Orchestra program transforms people," noted Ms. Avant, who cited studies showing that high school students involved in music programs attend better colleges, get better jobs and lead more satisfying lives.

About 600 students participate in the program every year.

Sunday's concert was conducted by the Grammy Award-winning John McLaughlin Williams, himself a program veteran.

"It was exciting to be around all that music," said Mr. Williams, who noted that he wasn't always the best-behaved student during the three-hour Saturday morning rehearsals.

Ward 6 D.C. Councilman Tommy Wells presented a special award to Mr. McLain, who took up the baton one last time to conduct his former students in the "Arioso" from "Cantata 156," Bach's "prayer of one near death." Many in the orchestra played the piece with tears streaming down their faces.



Emcee Jennifer Cover Payne and former Secretary of Transportation Rodney Slater were among the orchestra's supporters, faculty, students and alumni at the concert.

Afterward, the tributes to the orchestra and Maestro McLain continued upstairs in the atrium, with entertainment provided by a jazz ensemble composed of — you guessed it — former DCYO participants.

— Lisa Rauschart