

Musical mentoring: Youth orchestra marks 50 years of inspiring students

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CLASSICAL MUSIC is not so much a career as a passion. For Nora Thomas, 26-year-old associate conductor of the Marin Symphony Youth Orchestra (MSYO), the music never stopped once she started playing piano at age 6.

"I never planned on being a professional musician," she says. "But I just kept going."

During her college music studies, she encountered many people who had given up on playing an instrument because of a bad experience, and this spurred her to become passionate not only about playing, but about teaching. Now, in addition to working with the youth orchestra, Thomas is an elementary school music teacher in Mill Valley, mentoring the next generation of musicians.

Hugo Rinaldi, former director of music for the San Rafael City Schools, was also passionate about sharing music with young people. In 1955 - long before Thomas was born - Rinaldi began mentoring generations of Marin musicians as founding conductor of the MSYO, which was started and still operates under the auspices of the Marin Symphony. He retired from that position 34 years later, at about the time Thomas started playing woodwinds in her sixth-grade school music program at Lake Tahoe.

Like a coach to an athlete, a teacher or mentor can make all the difference to a young musician. That's what happened to Josh Lamstein, a graduating senior at Terra Linda High. In fourth grade, Lamstein started studying keyboard with teacher Clarence Stephens, whose primary musical instrument was the string bass. After two years, Lamstein had progressed so rapidly, Stephens suggested he find another teacher, one who specialized in keyboard.

Lamstein, however, had a different solution.

"I really liked him," he says of his first teacher, "so I took up the bass."

Two years later, he auditioned and was accepted into the string section of the youth orchestra.

"It's been a great experience," Lamstein says of his five years in MSYO, giving credit to George Thomson, who started as the group's music director the same year Lamstein joined. "George has always given us challenging music. We're actually playing professional music, not student music."

Learning about quality music is just one of the benefits of playing in a youth orchestra, explains Chris Jennings, Marin Symphony cellist and head of the symphony's youth education committee.

"When we originally started with the youth orchestra, the idea was to educate and give them a performing opportunity."

At its high point in the 1970s, the group even toured and performed in Vienna. Jennings, whose own children played in the youth orchestra then, watched the decline of student music opportunities after Proposition 13 cut funding in the schools.

"As the years have gone by, they have cut programs more and more," she says.

To make up for part of the loss, the Marin Symphony sponsors a number of music education programs, including the youth symphony.

"Not all orchestras have a youth orchestra connected with them," Jennings explained. "Marin is one of the pioneers in that regard."

While many school music programs in the county suffer funding problems, one school does not is the music conservatory at San Domenico School in San Anselmo. Not only is the school's virtuoso program directed by MSYO's Thomson, but the choral director at the school is MSYO alum Michael Mello.

In fact, Mello and MSYO have deep connections. Mello spent four years in MSYO under Rinaldi, whom he knew through his wife, Faith France. France, who in 1977 founded the San Domenico Conservatory of Music, taught Mello how to play the piano. Later, as an orchestra member, Mello held the spotlight as soloist, playing a very difficult Liszt piano concerto. After graduation, he went on to Oberlin College, one of the most renowned music schools in the country, intending to become a concert pianist.

But fate intervened. A year and a half into the college music program, Mello developed tendinitis and had to quit playing. But he didn't quit music. A passion like that never stops. Instead, he returned to Marin and studied voice at Dominican University, later earning a master's in music from Stanford. Shortly afterward, France hired her protégé to teach at San Domenico, where he nurtured young people for 30 years - serving the past 25 years as choral director as well.

Because of his own experience and his passion for music, Mello is particularly enthusiastic about the youth orchestra.

"It's a great opportunity for high school musicians," he says. "They should definitely avail themselves of the opportunity, especially now that George Thomson is doing such great things to bring the orchestra back up to what it was."

But the youth orchestra is not just for the musicians who play in it, emphasizes Jennings.

"It's wonderful for the community to see young people who have put in time and effort to learn an instrument and to be in a group and learn how to perform together. The community really appreciates seeing that kids can do something besides play Nintendo."

Thomas agrees. She wants the community to be aware that the youth symphony "is a real orchestra, with quality music and quality playing, so she invites everyone to attend the annual spring performance this Sunday. "It's a free concert," she says, "so that's even better."

This will be Lamstein's last performance with the MSYO, but he has high hopes for the future and for his mentor, Thomson.

"I hope he'll be the conductor of a professional symphony some day," he says. In fact, he hopes Thomson becomes conductor of the San Francisco Symphony.

If he did, would Lamstein like to play under him? "Yeah," he says. "That'd be awesome."