

Fun serious

by Michael Stugin

David Bernard leads the Park Avenue Chamber Symphony in performance at the Schimmel Center for the Arts in New York.



Jennifer Taylor

Amateur and affinity orchestras give musicians not only a personal creative outlet, but a means of sharing their passion for symphonic music with their communities.



Cardinal Health Chamber Orchestra

Conductor Derek Harrah leads Dublin, Ohio's Cardinal Health Chamber Orchestra in a holiday concert.

On a Friday evening in May in Los Angeles, Dr. Ivan Shulman rehearsed his orchestra for Saturday's concert. A few hours later, he was called to a nearby hospital to perform two emergency surgical procedures, both pacemaker implants. The next night, at a church in nearby San Fernando Valley, Shulman led the Los Angeles Doctors Symphony Orchestra in a performance of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4, Franck's Symphonic Variations, and Rimsky-Korsakov's *Capriccio Espagnole*. The small church, which hosts four different congregations in an ethnically diverse community, was chosen because the original venue for the concert had been inadvertently double-booked and was not available. Shulman had never seen the new venue, nor had the orchestra ever practiced there. Still, Shulman says the concert was well received and his group hopes to play there again next season, adding, "We introduced orchestral music to a few hundred people, including some kids, who almost certainly had never attended a concert before."

For many orchestras across the country, a weekend like this is not unusual. While the larger orchestras—those with salaried musicians and staff—tend to dominate their local music scene and media coverage, numerous amateur orchestras play away in relative obscurity, but with infinite exuberance. These orchestras don't aim to compete with professional orchestras. Instead, they offer a grass-roots alternative that gives their members the chance to continue as active musicians and share their passion for music with their communities. Playing in such an orchestra is a welcome break for full-time professionals in fields such as medicine, law, computer and software development, and healthcare services.

How to categorize these orchestras can be complicated, particularly if they are not among the League of American Orchestras' approximately 860 member organizations. There are numerous *amateur orchestras* in the U.S. in which the players and conductors are unpaid, and either have full-time jobs outside of music or are retired. Some music directors of these groups accept the term of amateur, pointing to the often fine line between highly accomplished professional and amateur athletes; but others bristle, saying

their musicians operate on a par with some regional orchestras. (It is worth noting that the root of the word *amateur* comes from the Latin *amare*, meaning to love. Only in later years did the word take on its modern interpretation, which connotes not only the pursuit of something as a pastime rather than a profession but also carries with it an implication of lack of experience or competence.)

Many amateur orchestras call themselves *community orchestras*, and they range, literally, from coast to coast: the Bainbridge Symphony Orchestra, near Seattle, Washington; Des Moines Community Orchestra, in Iowa; the Town & Country Symphony Orchestra, in St. Louis; Neponset Valley Philharmonic Orchestra, outside of Boston; the Susquehanna Symphony Orchestra, in Bel Air, Maryland; the Downey Symphony Orchestra, in Los Angeles County; the Greenwich Village Orchestra, in New York City; the Symphony of the Potomac, in Montgomery County, Maryland; and the Summerville Community Orchestra, in South Carolina. They have diverse memberships of amateur musicians, often including college and even high school students; they may or may not hold auditions; and they focus on their immediate community or even a neighborhood.

Then there are *affinity orchestras*. This term, in its broadest sense, describes an orchestra whose players are unpaid musicians who share a strong connection, such as an employer or a profession. For some affinity orchestras, the driving force is simply their members' intense passion for playing. Among the better known affinity orchestras organized around a profession are the Chicago Bar Association Symphony Orchestra; the Longwood Symphony Orchestra, in Boston; the Texas Medical Center Orchestra of Houston; the Life Sciences Orchestra, in Ann Arbor,

Michigan; and the Los Angeles Doctors Symphony Orchestra.

There are also affinity orchestras formed around gender and sexual orientation. Groups such as the Community Women's Orchestra in Oakland, California, Women in Music Columbus, and the Cleveland Women's Orchestra consist solely of female players and have a mission to champion the work of female composers. In New York, the Queer Urban Orchestra, founded in 2009, is a gay and lesbian affinity orchestra, but says its membership is open to all adult musicians regardless of age, race, religion, sexual orientation, or gender identity. The Queer Urban Orchestra says it strives to promote equality, understanding, acceptance, and respect.

Another category of affinity orchestra is the *corporate orchestra*, consisting entirely or mostly of employees from one company. After decades of mergers and budget cutbacks, many corporate orchestras have gone silent or morphed into community orchestras with a broader base of players. Among corporate orchestras still playing are Boeing Company's Orchestra of Flight, in Seattle; the Cardinal Health Chamber Orchestra, in Dublin, Ohio; and the Microsoft Symphony, in Redmond, Washington. Recently, two of the oldest corporate orchestras have been reconstituted as stand-alone community orchestras: the Hewlett Packard Symphony Orchestra, in San Jose, California, is now the South Bay Philharmonic; and the 3M Club Symphony Orchestra, in St. Paul, Minnesota, is now the East Metro Symphony Orchestra.

"We love that we fill up the halls at our big concerts, but we love it even more when we take our music out into the community for those who would not hear it otherwise," says Dr. Lisa Wong of Boston's Longwood Symphony Orchestra, which focuses on the medical profession.



Tom Kates

Getting the Rust Out

Early in 2010, nearly 400 of the more than 600 amateur musicians who had applied received an exciting email from the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra: “You have been selected to perform with the Rusty Musicians Orchestra, on stage at the Music Center at Strathmore with members of the BSO under the baton of Maestra Marin Alsop.” The Rusty Musicians Orchestra was designed to celebrate the Baltimore Symphony



Tracy Brown

Baltimore Symphony Orchestra Music Director Marin Alsop hugs amateur cellist Max Weiss at the BSO's Rusty Musicians program.

Orchestra's fifth anniversary at the Music Center at Strathmore in North Bethesda, Maryland. The program is similar to one that Alsop pioneered when she was principal conductor with England's Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra. The only criteria for participants were to be older than 25, play an orchestral instrument, read music, and pay a \$10 application fee. Over two evenings last February, eight groups of students performed alongside BSO players in a 40-minute program of the fourth movement from Tchaikovsky's *Symphony No. 4* and the “Nimrod” movement from Elgar's *Enigma Variations*. The experiment was a success, and it was repeated in September at Meyerhoff Symphony Hall.

Taking the concept of community-building a step up, in June the BSO launched the BSO Academy, a week-long program with daily sessions of performance and instruction held at the BSO's Baltimore home, the Joseph Meyerhoff Symphony Hall. For tuition of \$1,650, plus accommodations and fees for optional private classes, 50 adult amateur musicians were exposed to a program of immersive music instruction and playing with BSO members. “Our musicians were excited about working on the academy,” Meecham says. “The schedule was packed with section sessions with BSO players, master classes, seminars, practices, chamber music in the evenings, and a look behind the scenes at how an orchestra operates.” Given the strong initial interest, Meecham says the BSO will likely repeat the Rusty Musicians Orchestra experiment and consider expanding the BSO Academy, perhaps adding a track for pre-professional students. “We want to look at how an orchestra can reach more people, especially to connect with and develop people's interest in music.”

Corporate Sounds

The Cardinal Health Chamber Orchestra consists mostly of employees of Cardinal Health, Inc., a hundred-billion dollar health services company, in Dublin, Ohio. Its music director, Ron Reich, a software specialist in Cardinal Health's IT Department and a violinist, started the group in his basement in 1997 with another Cardinal employee. The duo quickly became a ten-member chamber ensemble, and the orchestra today has 60 players, about three-quarters of whom are Cardinal employees. The group's conductor is Derek Harrah, a software specialist at Cardinal, who once took a course in music theory and composition while studying for degrees in math and chemistry at Ohio State University.

For more than a decade, the orchestra has brought classical music to nursing homes and senior centers throughout its area. At one such performance a few years ago, the audience included the mother of one of Cardinal Health's founders. Within days, someone from company management was

knocking on Reich's door expressing the company's interest in expanding the group's local presence. Today, the company pays for sheet music and invites the orchestra to play at company management meetings and holiday parties. Reich also says the Cardinal Health Chamber Orchestra has raised over a hundred thousand dollars on behalf of local charities.

Programming and performances, and even rehearsals, are challenging: at any given time key players are traveling on company business or otherwise not available. Reich says the group often calls on Women in Music Columbus for volunteer string players, and even Columbus Symphony Orchestra Concertmaster Charles Weatherbee occasionally joins the ensemble.

Cardinal Health Chamber Orchestra's repertoire features brief classical standards along the lines of Verdi's *Grand March* from *Aida*, Lecuona's “Malagueña,” and Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man*. But there can be surprises along the way. Reich and Harrah are particularly proud of what

they believe is the U.S. premiere in 2010 of a brief piano concerto by Shostakovich, “Assault on Beautiful Gorky,” from the Soviet-era film *The Unforgettable Year 1919*. “I heard this piece a few years ago on a U.K.-based internet radio station,” says Harrah. “It was at the top of the classical chart. We found that the music had never been imported to the U.S. It was our first premiere.”

Of the twenty or so community orchestras in California's Silicon Valley, George Yefchak, principal conductor of the South Bay Philharmonic, in San Jose, believes that his orchestra differentiates itself by inclusivity. It calls itself “an open-source symphony” which means, says Yefchak, “We let anybody in! We are trying to give opportunities to heartfelt players to play. We have people with skills ranging from high-school level to near professional.” Most of the South Bay Philharmonic players are working professionals with advanced degrees in engineering, mathematics or chemistry, and have had music training. Yefchak himself intermittently studied piano and then oboe in high school, and played during graduate school at Michigan State, where he received a doctorate in chemistry. Today, in addition to conducting the South Bay Philharmonic, he is a member of the technical staff at Agilent Laboratories and is co-principal oboist of the nearby Redwood Symphony Orchestra.

The South Bay Philharmonic has unusual roots: until 2009 it was the Hewlett Packard Symphony Orchestra. Founded in 1993 by Music Director Herb Gellis and a few musician-engineers, for sixteen years it was one of the most accomplished (and well-funded) corporate orchestras in the U.S. HP moved on, spinning off half of its business into what is now Agilent Technologies. The Hewlett Packard Symphony Orchestra no longer exists, but many of its members are now building the South Bay Philharmonic into what they hope will be a top-notch community orchestra for San Jose. The orchestra has 50 members, many of whom are professionals at HP, Agilent, Google, and other Silicon Valley companies.

Gellis says that the South Bay Philharmonic is a labor of love. With no outside funding, the players pay dues of \$20 per concert. The group currently performs three concerts a year, usually at the Foothill Presbyterian Church in San Jose. Concerts are free and donations are split with the church. Each performance attracts 50 to 100 peo-

ple, mostly friends and family of the players and church members. Gellis and Yefchak relish the opportunity to blaze new territory, even if it is close to home in Silicon Valley. The recent season's highlight was a concert of all American music that featured William Grant Still's Symphony No. 1, "Afro-American," a composition from 1930 that was the first full symphony written by an African-American composer. Attendance at this concert was the largest of the season, due in part to several dozen followers of Still's work who drove from all over California to attend.

Medicinal Music-Making

The Los Angeles Doctors Symphony Orchestra is one of the oldest community orchestras in the United States with its origin in the health professions. Founded in 1953, it was initially composed of three dozen doctors, dentists, veterinarians, nurses, other medical staff, and two doctors' wives. Its first concerts were performed at the stately Philharmonic Auditorium in downtown Los Angeles. Over the years, the orchestra played to sold-out audiences, hosted guests including Donald O'Connor, Debbie Reynolds, and Jerry Lewis, and drew crowds of more than 1,000 to outdoor concerts in Beverly Hills and Roxbury Park in Los Angeles.

Today, Music Director Ivan Shulman points out that the Los Angeles Doctors Symphony is confronting some of the same challenges as professional orchestras. "We need to define who we are today because our core older audience is dying off," he says, "and there are many other community orchestras in the Los Angeles area. In addition, our name does not give us much visibility or even reflect who we are today." Of the current 50-player roster, only ten

are physicians. Still, with a near-60 year history, there is resistance to changing the group's name. Shulman says that the Los Angeles Doctors Symphony, which is a nonprofit organization, is working on a new governance structure and engaging in more concerted fundraising so that it can afford a regular rehearsal space.

Shulman is in his twentieth year as music director, and he seems to embody the characteristics that affinity orchestras need for survival. "Until I semi-retired in 2006, for most of my adult life I was a full-time surgeon, parent, and musician," he says. "It is amazing that people are capable of doing several things with equal passion." Well before he graduated from the University of Pittsburgh Medical School and embarked on a medical career, music was a central part of Shulman's life. As a child, he studied oboe with his father, Harry Shulman, principal oboist for the NBC Symphony under Arturo Toscanini. In 2008, while still maintaining a part-time private medical practice and doing medical missionary work in Kenya and the Philippines, Shulman went back to school to earn a master's degree in music at California State University at Long Beach. His thesis on Ives's Second Symphony won the music department's Outstanding Thesis Award.

Boston's music scene is dominated by world-class orchestra, opera, and ballet companies, yet the Longwood Symphony Orchestra seems to be heard and seen everywhere. Dr. Lisa Wong, the orchestra's president, says that the group, its musicians drawn primarily from Boston's medical community, has never strayed from its mission of performing high-quality concerts while supporting medically related nonprofit organizations. Longwood Symphony Or-

Broadly, the term affinity orchestra describes an orchestra whose players are unpaid musicians who share a strong connection, such as an employer or a profession.

chestra's "formal season" is four concerts in New England Conservatory's beautiful Jordan Hall and two summer concerts in Lenox, Massachusetts, at Tanglewood Music Center's Seiji Ozawa Hall, the main venue for the Boston Symphony Orchestra's Tanglewood Music Festival. Longwood's music director and conductor is Jonathan McPhee, also music director of the Boston Ballet Orchestra, Lexington Symphony, and Nashua (N.H.) Symphony Orchestra.

"We love that we fill up the halls at our big concerts," Wong says, "but we love it even more when we take our music out into the community for those who would not hear it otherwise." Indeed, with a roster of 120 musicians, about 80 percent of whom work in medical fields, Longwood Symphony Orchestra's chamber groups perform at least twelve concerts every year at local hospitals, homeless shelters, care facilities for patients with Alzheimer's disease, and other special-needs facilities. While McPhee is a paid contractor and the group employs a full-time general manager, Wong and the twelve-person board balance their professional roles as doctors, medical researchers, and administrators with frequent practice, rehearsals, and performances.

"Our model for providing music and service seems to be setting an example for community engagement and for keeping orchestras relevant," Wong believes. For example, in early 2010 the Longwood Symphony and New England Conservatory participated with more than 25 other musical organizations in a global Symphonic Relief for Haiti program; this summer, a Health and Harmony on the Harbor day featured a family health fair and concert expected to draw at least 3,000 Bostonians.

Making a Case for Orchestras

It was not the season wrap-up concert that reporters and TV stations were calling David Katz about, although a standing-room-only audience for Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5 and Poulenc's *Gloria* with the Chicago Bar Association Symphony Orchestra and Chorus could be called newsworthy. Instead, they were calling about Diane Wood,



California's South Bay Philharmonic performs Dvorák's Symphony No. 8 with Conductor George Yefchak.

the U.S. 7th Circuit Court of Appeals judge and the orchestra's longtime oboe and English horn player. Wood was on the short list for nomination to the U.S. Supreme Court—so Katz and his Chicago group briefly enjoyed national media attention.

The orchestra is funded primarily by the Chicago Bar Association, although its musicians pay membership dues and it charges \$10 for tickets to its concerts. Both Music Director David Katz and Chorus Director Rebecca Patterson are paid independent contractors. Its primary performance venue is the 500-seat St. James Episcopal Cathedral, an architectural landmark in Chicago's trendy Magnificent Mile neighborhood. The orchestra has 70 players, including judges, law clerks, attorneys, and law students. The orchestra practices in a courtroom at Chicago's Daly Center, and presiding judges have been known to adjourn proceedings in late afternoon because they know a rehearsal or concert is pending.

"The remarkable thing about our members is that they bring the same intensity and discipline to practices and performances that are required during their working day," says Katz. "But while their work day may have been stressful, they put that aside when they come to play and actually relax. The result is that they play at a very high level, certainly higher than they would be able to play in a less motivated environment." Katz says the orchestra does not hold formal auditions, but has a natural "self-pruning" process in which the weakest players eventually leave.

Katz has been the group's music director since it was established in 1985. At the time, he was assistant conductor, under Music Director Margaret Hillis, at the Elgin Symphony, 40 miles northwest of Chicago. Even though he lives in Connecticut and has held other conducting posts, including the Adrian Symphony Orchestra in Michigan, Katz has happily trekked to Chicago for the Bar Association's concerts and special performances. Katz's programming reflects his audience's tastes and enthusiasm. The group's 25th-anniversary season includes works by Beethoven, Dvořák, Gershwin, and Orff. The orchestra and chorus were featured performers in September's annual Justice John Paul Stevens Award Ceremony and Gala Celebration.

The Park Avenue Chamber Symphony in New York City defies conventional categories such as amateur and community.



The Chicago Bar Association Symphony Orchestra and Chorus perform Beethoven's Ninth Symphony at Chicago's Navy Pier.

At least that is David Bernard's unequivocal opinion. In fact, he does not think his players are amateurs, although none of them makes a living in music. Bernard, the group's founder and music director, frowns on what he calls "artistic profiling" and says it is difficult to define musicians based on how they make a living. "Our players are 'multiprofessionals' who, while in careers other than music, are extremely disciplined musicians who perform at a professional level with the highest dedication and accomplishment," he says.

Bernard argues that the Park Avenue Chamber Symphony, founded in 1999, is one of the finest—if not the finest—of the dozen unpaid orchestras in New York City. In addition to focusing intensely on playing, the group also supports philanthropic and educational programs such as the Juilliard Pre-College Program and the Harmony Program, a nonprofit dedicated to providing music instruction in New York City public schools. Big fundraising events allow the group to perform at such venues as Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, and the Plaza Hotel, in addition to its permanent home at All Saints Episcopal Church on East 60th Street.

While the larger orchestras tend to dominate their local music scene and media coverage, numerous amateur orchestras play away in relative obscurity, but with immeasurable exuberance.

In one of the country's most professionally and musically dense urban areas, it is not surprising that Park Avenue Chamber Symphony players combine high-powered careers with considerable musical accomplishment. Its 70 members include investment bankers,

corporate executives, attorneys, physicians, and officials from city and state government agencies and the United Nations. Many orchestra members graduated from or studied at The Juilliard School, Manhattan School of Music, or The Curtis Institute of Music, and some are former members of professional orchestras. Bernard is a graduate of Juilliard and Curtis and has been assistant conductor of the Stamford Symphony in Connecticut and the Jacksonville Symphony in Florida.

For David Edelson, a physician and the Park Avenue Chamber Symphony's concertmaster, playing with the group is deeply satisfying. "We have a love for music that never died, even as we pursued other careers," he says. "The challenge for many of us has been to find a group that plays at a high enough level. I enjoy the artistry of music and ability to create such a high-caliber performance."

Edelson believes the Park Avenue Chamber Symphony and its players are important in what he calls the "dynamic" of New York City's music community. Drawing its typical audience of about 400 people per concert from the neighborhood around All Saints Church, and then performing for larger crowds at fundraising events, means that "we give an opportunity for many people to be close to the music and be a part of the music life in the city," he says.

A Community of Music

In the anxiety-laden debate about the contemporary relevance of orchestras, it is encouraging that the orchestral music scene in the U.S. includes so many thriving small orchestras. Regardless of what we call them—amateur, community, or affinity—they are playing and people are listening.

As Paul Meecham, president and CEO of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, observes, "The perception gap between ama-

teur and professional music-making did not exist 50 years ago. The quality of playing today in many community music groups is high. It is particularly exciting to see so many young musicians playing in local orchestras.”

Relieved of the pressure of marketing and fundraising, affinity orchestras display clarity and immediacy of purpose: It’s all about the music. From a San Fernando Valley church to a senior center in rural Ohio to Carnegie Hall, affinity orchestras seem able to establish a close, informal connection between musicians and audiences—and the music.

For the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, building a community of music is a top issue. “The days of just running an ad for a Saturday evening concert and expecting people to fill the hall are long gone,” Meecham says. “The challenge is to reach people at multiple touchpoints. Most people are very busy, but they will still make time for music if you reach out to them.”

This year, the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra has reached out to amateur musicians, many of whom play in local orchestras, to bring them together with its players and Music Director Marin Alsop for instruction and a concert performance. While Baltimore’s Rusty Musicians Orchestra and BSO Academy experiments (see sidebar) might remind us of the adult baseball and tennis academies, they are actually part of Baltimore’s effort to connect with new audiences.

In New York City, Bernard is convinced that the Park Avenue Chamber Symphony’s insistence on performance excellence combined with its neighborhood and philanthropic involvement is a model for regional and even top-tier orchestras. “To a degree,” he says, “a sustainable music organization is a miraculous thing, because it requires staying connected to the community.” **S**

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