

MUSIC REVIEW

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A youth symphony turns 50, with help from Yo-Yo Ma

By Jeremy Eichler, Globe Staff | May 21, 2008

The invaluable Boston Youth Symphony Orchestras have been marking their 50th anniversary season this year with a number of milestones, including the organization's first performance of a complete opera - "Così Fan Tutte" - in Sanders Theatre this winter. On Sunday, the BYSO (formerly GBYSO) capped its celebrations with a rousing Symphony Hall concert that featured Yo-Yo Ma performing Dvorak's Cello Concerto with the most advanced of its orchestras, the Boston Youth Symphony, under music director Federico Cortese.

These days the BYSO (of which, in full disclosure, I am a grateful alumnus) maintains three full orchestras and six smaller ensembles, collectively serving some 440 young musicians from 120 communities across New England, so a single concert was not the occasion to spotlight everyone. Instead, the organization showcased both ends of its spectrum, opening with a massive onstage convention of its most junior participants, drawn from the Young People's String Orchestra and the Intensive Community Program, which focuses on under-represented youth. Some players onstage were as young as 8 years old, but anyone expecting a ragged arrangement of old Suzuki tunes must have been bowled over by the large, warm, and unified sound this group produced, especially in the Allegro of Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 3. Bonnie Black conducted with abundant clarity and a touching level of involvement.

The older players of the BYS ended the first half of the program with a crisp and technically solid account of Dvorak's Symphony No. 8 under Cortese. When the brass and woodwind solos hit their mark, they did so brilliantly, and the intonation and ensemble work in the strings was also quite fine. Overall, these students play at a very high level, and Cortese is clearly achieving impressive results. The families present in the sold-out house rightly cheered this performance as a major accomplishment.

And yet, during the Dvorak symphony, I found myself wondering whether there is such a thing as too much professionalism in a youth orchestra. In this case, I would have gladly traded some of the fine sheen and the pre-collegiate seriousness for more youthful passion and exuberance in the orchestra's sound. Nor must the two be mutually exclusive. When the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra played Symphony Hall earlier this season, what made its performance so irresistible was precisely the embrace of both sides: high technical standards coupled with a visceral energy and sheer joy in music-making.

Of course there are also role models much closer to home, which is why Ma's presence was so welcome. Without leaving the soloist's circuit, he has continually rejuvenated himself with various alternative projects such that he can maintain a freshness and spontaneity even in the ultimate cello warhorse, the Dvorak Concerto, which he has surely performed more times than he can remember. You would never know it from the intensity, fervor, and deep commitment he brought to the solo line on Sunday.

The BYS musicians seemed drawn into his orbit, playing with more excitement and conviction, and Cortese drew out some rich inner voices in the orchestra that often pass by unnoticed. You had to appreciate Ma for performing as if it were the Berlin Philharmonic onstage behind him. And by the same token, I was grateful precisely because the BYS sounded here more like a youth orchestra, in the most admirable sense of the term.

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