

KENMORE

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At age 50, orchestra expands its overtures

By Rich Fahey, Globe Correspondent | September 30, 2007

At Boston Latin School, sophomore Gloria Ojimba is a member of the step squad and enjoys hip-hop, rhythm and blues, and the music of Mary J. Blige.

The Boston Youth Symphony Orchestras wants more artists like Ojimba.

The organization, which opens its 50th season next Sunday, has earned a reputation for excellence. The goal now is to maintain that level of excellence while continuing to make its ensembles more representative of the population in the Boston area.

Ojimba, a 16-year-old from Hyde Park, plays the string bass. She is one of seven musicians from the 119-member Boston Youth Symphony who have been nurtured in the Intensive Community Program, a nationally recognized string training program for underrepresented youths from urban communities.

"We knew it would take time to see results, but we are thrilled that nine years after starting this innovative program, we have made some phenomenal progress," said BYSO executive director Catherine Weiskel. "All of the kids who are accepted into BYSO work very hard for the opportunity."

Ojimba is looking to at least minor in music in college. She has been playing the bass for 10 years and says the discipline required to practice and perform in the orchestra "also helps me to focus on my other studies."

Having an increasing number of other African-American members has helped her feel more comfortable and confident. "I don't feel that there's anything we as a group can't do musically," she said.

Over the past half-century, the Boston Symphony Youth Orchestras have expanded from a single orchestra to three full symphonic orchestras, a string training orchestra, a preparatory wind ensemble, four chamber orchestras, and a chamber music program. Of the 440 students in the organization, 71, ranging from grades 1 to 12, came from the Intensive Community Program.

The youth organization hopes that in making its ranks more diverse, the musicians will gradually work their way to major professional ensembles such as the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Though the youth group is not affiliated with the BSO, many of its members harbor hopes of someday playing for the orchestra.

The BSO, as with virtually every major orchestra in the country, has struggled when it comes to cultural diversity. BSO spokeswoman Kathleen Drohan said two of the orchestra's 92 members are African-Americans, which puts it in line with most other major American orchestras.

A study by the Philadelphia Inquirer last April said that at the start of the 2006-'07 concert season, the Philadelphia Orchestra had three African-Americans - all hired in the 1970s. Major orchestras in Cleveland, New York, and Chicago had two, one, and one, respectively. A trumpeter hired in 2002 was Chicago's first African-American musician in the orchestra's 110-plus years.

In a wider look at orchestras of all sizes, a 2005 American Symphony Orchestra League survey found 237 African-American members - or 2 percent - in the 176 orchestras that responded to the survey.

According to the 2000 US Census, 22 percent of Suffolk County's population was African-American, compared with 12 percent nationally.

Arts advocates in Roxbury said there are several ways that classical music organizations can reach out to communities of color. "I think that it would be advantageous for organizations to be more connected to the community through classes or workshops that are given in the communities of color," said Lisa Simmons, director of the Color of Film Collaborative, a nonprofit group that promotes work by filmmakers of color or films about the communities. "These workshops and/or classes would help organizations such as this gain visibility and pique interest, and in turn break down barriers that may exist related to access."

Candelaria Silva-Collins, until recently head of ACT Roxbury, a nonprofit group that advocates for the arts, offered

several ways that the classical music world might gain more of a foothold in the African-American community, such as holding information nights at organizations and venues in the communities where youths and their families live; collaborating with organizations that already attract youths in music, such as Project STEP, Berklee City Music Program, and the Boston Children's Chorus; and linking up with local churches, professional organizations, and after-school programs in the Boston public schools.

And while African-Americans make up a small percentage of classical musicians and audiences, Silva-Collins and Simmons said there are many reasons why African-Americans might want to become involved with this genre.

"There is a rich African heritage that is part of classical music and part of the African-American cultural experience and history in the US," said Simmons.

Silva-Collins said that classical music has had African-American practitioners and aficionados since the 18th century, if not before. "It is a musical form that many African-Americans love and support. I like some classical music just as I like other forms of music," she said. "Music speaks to my soul. Many of the great jazz artists I love also loved and studied and played classical music, including Duke Ellington, Nina Simone, and Wynton Marsalis, to name but a few."

The Intensive Community Program began in 1999 as a way to address a lack of music training resources available to some children. Under the direction of Bonnie Black, the program accepts students ages 6 to 8 who show exceptional interest in studying string instruments, and provides them with financial assistance for weekly music lessons, ensemble classes, and instrument rental. The support enables them to pass auditions for one of BYSO's four orchestras.

Once admitted into a BYSO orchestra, the students receive tuition subsidies, weekly lessons, and use of an instrument until they graduate from high school.

The demands on members of the BYS are significant. Sunday rehearsals are five to six hours on top of practice time.

Veteran orchestra member and violinist Metok Hughes-Levine of Cambridge, 17, a senior at Cambridge Rindge & Latin School, said she spends up to 36 hours a week rehearsing and practicing. Hughes-Levine, who enjoys all types of "world music" when she's not playing the classical stuff, left the BYSO for her junior year of high school to concentrate on her studies before returning this year.

The hours are also long for Ifeanyi Chukwujama, 14, who came to the BYS through the Intensive Community Program. The Hyde Park resident, a freshman at Thayer Academy in Braintree, has been involved with the BYSO for six years and has been playing the bass since the second grade.

He also enjoys hip-hop, rhythm and blues, and jazz, and writing his own music and making rap music out of poems he's written. Football is another love, and that makes it a challenge to fit everything in. "Yeah, it's hard, but I make time for practice," he said, adding he'd like to stay involved with music in college.

The Boston Youth Symphony, the Repertory Orchestra, and the Junior Repertory Orchestra will open the 50th anniversary season at 3 p.m. next Sunday in a concert featuring Beethoven's Symphony No. 9; \$25 and \$30; Symphony Hall. The schedule for concerts in the 2007-2008 season is available at BYSOWEB.org; order tickets at 617-353-5353. ■