

EXCELSIOR VARIATIONS

How do you get to Carnegie Hall? A group of South Florida's most gifted young musicians prepares for the one chance that every musician dreams of – playing in the most storied of American music halls.

By Michael Keller

A

LINE OF ROSIN-COATED horsehair bows drag across single violin strings, together dripping a note that, if held a second longer, could cause the listener's heart to noticeably ache. Another long note follows, then two more quick ones. The French horns come in, adding a hint of majesty underneath the strings. Kettledrums and tubas rattle the audience's innards while the conductor pumps his baton, demanding adherence to the tempo and shaping the soundscape. The music's pace quickens as the whole orchestra exudes a flourishing garden of sound. Cymbals crash for a dramatic end.

Onlookers moved by the ensemble's rendition of British composer Edward Elgar's "Enigma Variations" offer applause, which is neither solicited nor expected. The rehearsing musicians cock instruments to the side and wait for the expected critique.

"Guys, there's a bit of rushing going on," says Music Director Thomas Sleeper. He's been pacing the periphery of the orchestra, which is seated in a semi-circle within a school gymnasium where they practice weekly.

"Dah, duh dah dee dee," he says from one of the lunchroom picnic tables

Photography By Edward Linsmier

“It’s every musician’s ultimate...
it’s my ultimate...dream.”

-Sage McBride, 10, violinist



TOP Associate Conductor Huifang Chen instructs violinist Sage McBride during practice. **TOP RIGHT** Music Director Thomas Sleeper conducts the FYO. **BOTTOM LEFT** Tuba player Aman Markos, 15, reads his music sheet. **BOTTOM RIGHT** McBride, second from left, is the youngest member of the principle orchestra at 10 years old.

wheeled in just before the rehearsal. Slapping hand to knee and tapping foot to floor in time, he demonstrates how the piece should be played. “Delay that third beat if nothing else.”

This is no now-defunct Florida Philharmonic, and members of the Florida Youth Orchestra still have a long way to go to make it to Miami’s New World Symphony or the country’s great music conservatories. But the organization as a whole, which accepts South Florida’s brightest rising musicians from 5 to 19 years old, is just around the corner from its performance at the hallowed hall of Carnegie, where it has been invited to play this month. And now in its 20th year operating, it’s an honor that both staff and musicians feel deeply about.

The orchestra starts again from the top, deftly making requested alterations. Nobody notices the second chair violinist slip a schoolbook onto her lap. She flips it open to a page ablaze with blue highlighting and begins to read, all the while keeping in time to the music. Her standmate, a flip-flop wearing violinist who may have just come from the beach, turns the sheet music to the next page. A cello player across from them pulls bow across strings, wearing a white baseball

cap turned backward in defiance of the music’s sobriety. The pace quickens again, accentuated by the deep notes of an upright bass played by a tall, shaggy-haired

musician. A pounding percussionist sports a Wu-Tang Clan T-shirt, the appellation of a New York City-based hip-hop band about as far from classical music as Carole King is from death metal.

On the left side of the 100-member orchestra and in the row nearest to parents waiting quietly for the rehearsal to end, 10-year-old Sage McBride sits arrow straight, the violin bow in his small right hand causing the only disturbance to the stillness of his body. The fifth grader from Weston’s Country Isles Elementary has been playing for five years, taking up the violin while enrolled at a Montessori school. His brown dress shirt, blue jeans and cowboy boots almost too big for his body, hint at his Texas origin. Meanwhile, his cherubic face and long slicked-back blonde hair betray his position as the youngest member of the principal orchestra, which will be the part of FYO performing in New York City.

“Once you play there, you’re at the top – there’s no limit,” Sage says, trailing off at the thought of the performance, which is





scheduled for Easter Sunday. “It’s every musician’s ultimate... it’s my ultimate... dream. It just makes my intestines feel like they’re blowing up.”

It would be too easy to call Sage and the other young members naturals; that would diminish their passion and their – and their parents’ – hard work. They endure over three-hour rehearsals most Mondays throughout the year, practice at home intensely, and juggle school and social lives. String players with the gift often start around the age of 4 or 5, a requirement for the years of training necessary to master their instruments.

More than 300 aspiring musicians make the weekly trek to Nova Southeastern University’s gymnasium to practice. They have all weathered tough auditions for seats in the organization’s nine ensembles – a process that culls two out of three applicants and leaves only the most promising. FYO employees say around 3 percent of the students go on to conservatory training and then musical careers.

Parents, meanwhile, must endure too. They drive from as far afield as Palm Beach Gardens and Homestead to give their kids this opportunity. They wait at the lunchroom tables laid out before the orchestra, some

working on their laptops, others listening intently to the now polished scores they’ve heard mature from mere squeaks in home garages and bedrooms.

“This is the only group around here for this,” says Gary Schwartz, a parent and musician whose 13-year-old son Joshua plays the French horn. “If it wasn’t for this, there would be nowhere for him to play. The other thing I love is that I get to spend time with my son. I get to take him out to dinner. It’s a wonderful thing.”

Executive Director and co-founder Myra Weaver started the group along with her late husband, well-known TV weatherman Bob Weaver. The couple saw a void for young aspiring musicians. Community response to the non-profit program has turned it into a seven-day-a-week job, Weaver says.

“The fundraising never ends,” Weaver says. “Maintaining the program is a continual challenge because of budget cuts to the arts and the need for us to seek out individual donors. But still, I couldn’t love it more; I see the extensive benefits to the children. This goes way beyond music.”

Missy Walfish, one of several FYO

volunteers, says she has seen those benefits firsthand with her son. At an early age, he was diagnosed with a learning disability. She pushed him to practice with the orchestra and saw the change as he forced his brain to focus and work.

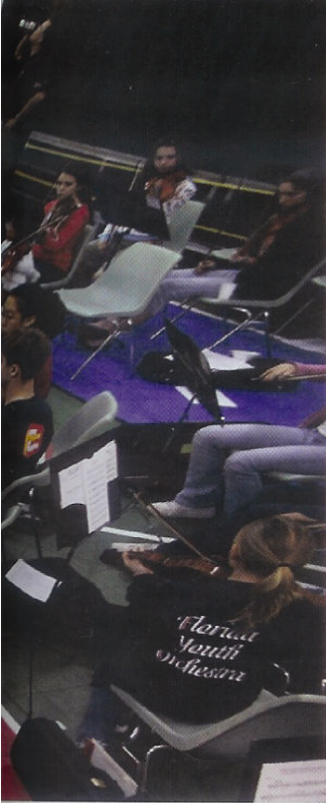
“Their brains become so developed,” she says. “And they don’t smoke. They know how to balance their schedules. My son started at age 6 and, with hard work, has made it to college.”

“n o, no. Once again,” says Associate Conductor Huifang Chen, bringing the violin section to a halt from her podium. They start on a phrase of the composition where the rest of the orchestra – strings, brass, woodwinds and percussion – will come in after their lead.

“Not quite,” Chen says, signaling them to stop again.

“Very pale,” she says, and then hums the music the way it should come out of their instruments.

They play the piece again. To the untrained ear, it sounds the very same as the time before. But something has changed for



Sage McBride plays Garrick Stout (at right) in a game of *Zelda* while Daniel Reed (at far left) and Anna Rudzinski (standing) look on before practice.

the conductor.

"Nice," she says at the end of the part. "Alright, next one."

The musicians flip their sheet music to the next part of Elgar's "Enigma Variations." The piece is one of Sage's favorites at rehearsal. At home practicing, though, his passion gravitates toward Austrian Joseph Haydn and German Johann Bach. Surprisingly, he doesn't list Beethoven with these other great musicians, since that's what he's dubbed his pet cockatiel.

"When I play really beautifully, Beethoven gives a wolf whistle," Sage says. "He goes on my shoulder when I play Haydn, Bach or Beethoven. Right now, I'm trying to teach him Beethoven's Fifth. I don't have much time outside of practice or schoolwork, so he's become my best friend."

Sage is a smart and personable young man. As he plays, his brain is continuously being forced to read visual symbols for musical notes. It then must translate those symbols into motor movements to create the sound they imply. Finally, it must monitor the sound as it comes out for accuracy. In short, according to researchers at Harvard Medical School and Boston College, all that work is making Sage's brain, along with those of other child musicians, grow more powerful daily compared to the brains of children who don't play music. Research has shown that musical training can improve math and verbal skills along with increasing visual-spatial reasoning. A University of Toronto scientist separately published a study in the peer-reviewed journal *Psychological Science* showing music instruction slightly raises IQ scores compared to students who do not take lessons.

Parents of FYO musicians see the difference in their kids, though it is hard to say whether they are smarter because of their music or whether they accelerate at their music because they are smarter.

"I bet kids in this orchestra have [school grade point averages] way higher than the state average," parent Gary Schwartz says. "They are working on their spatial intelligence. There's also more teamwork going on out there than on a football team."

The group takes a single break in the middle of the rehearsal. Parents line up rows of soda-filled plastic cups and lay out a spread of chips, cookies and donut holes. Musicians swarm

the tables, filling up on sugar and caffeine to carry them through the second half. A boy swaggers up to two seated girls and sits down confidently with his orange soda. Instrumental skills are not the fount for flirtatious grandstanding here as the girls, too, are practiced violinists. Instead he tells a tale of his great rugby skills. They giggle and flirt back.

Across the room, 15-year-old tuba player Aman Markos sits with family as he eats his snacks. The Pembroke Pines Charter High School freshman is confident in his musical skills. He enjoys competitive marching bands more than the orchestra, so he doesn't intend to continue with FYO next year. He's been playing for four years and figures he'll keep it up, maybe even through college, but says there are too many rests between tuba parts in the typical classical arrangement to keep him interested. He's most interested in Christian ministry and wants to be an evangelist when he grows up.

"I don't practice very much," Aman says. "I have a natural ability. It took me about two years to get it right, but now I've got it pretty well."

The break ends and the musicians find their seats again. An intricate interplay between two groups of violins begins. The conductor marks time "dah, dah, dah" to help them through it. Something happens to the timing and the whole thing falls apart. A few girls laugh at the collapse, others smile. Either the musicians get it, or the kids in the musicians get it. Either way, I don't.

They begin anew and get it right this time.

"Nice," Chen calls out over the continuing music. Her baton pumps furiously. Violin bows point straight into the air and fingers pluck the strings, releasing punctuated bursts of sound. Oboes and trombones meet lips. Across the room, Aman's tuba rises from its resting lowered position, the orchestra's smokestack now belching out deep exclamation mark notes.

And suddenly, all the instruments blend into the unison of sounds implied by the Greek word *symphonia*, the root of what they are trying to accomplish. It is art. I shut my eyes from the glaring white lights of the school gymnasium and the rubberized safety tile of the basketball court floor, on top of which the musicians play. We are transported away from this non-descript place, away from the extended driving commutes demanded by rehearsal and school and work, away from the daily deadlines of the workday world. To beauty. To Carnegie Hall. ■