

“Saturday Special”
GTCYS Chamber Music coaching sessions with the SPCO and London Sinfonietta
Saturday, January 17, 2009

For a select group of motivated young musicians from the Greater Twin Cities Youth Symphonies, the “Saturday Special” is not about sleeping late and staying in their pajamas until noon – instead, it’s a unique opportunity to explore chamber music performance with coaches from the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra. The program – which debuted last year and is exclusive to GTCYS – brings SPCO professionals and GTCYS chamber music students together on four Saturday mornings throughout the year for intensive rehearsals and coaching sessions. Student ensembles receive artistic direction and first-hand feedback about life as a performing artist from SPCO mentors. From an initial enrollment of nineteen students in 2007 – 2008, the “Saturday Special” program has grown this year to thirty-one GTCYS high school students in eight small performing ensembles.

On January 17th GTCYS students have a special bonus – face-time with members of the London Sinfonietta, in town for the SPCO’s month-long International Chamber Music Festival. As students and coaches begin to arrive in the SPCO’s Gathering Space on the third floor of the historic Hamm Building in downtown Saint Paul, I ask Paul Silverthorne, London Sinfonietta’s principal viola, whether his orchestra does much education and outreach back in England. His eyes light up as he answers “We really do! We were a pioneer, actually.” The London Sinfonietta’s website bills the chamber group “one of the first UK orchestras to explore the creative space where artistic and educational experiences meet.” A consummate performer and teacher – he’s a professor at the Royal Academy of Music, which has lent him the 1620 Amati viola on which he plays – Silverthorne is eager to get right to work.

He greets his three GTCYS students – Austin Rawlings and Collin Arneson, violins, and Andy Lesser, cello, informally: “Hello, I’m Paul.” The ensemble’s student leader, viola Noel Anderson, couldn’t make it and Silverthorne welcomes the opportunity to sit in as the group tackles Beethoven’s *Quartet Opus 18, No. 4*.

After launching into the first few passages of the work, Silverthorne stops and offers a quintessentially British evaluation. “That opening was really all over the shop, wasn’t it?” He encourages the cello and 1st violin to coordinate their playing to anchor the piece. “Come in with presence,” he exhorts, “it’s not a matter of loudness.” He takes special pains with the 1st violin, the player responsible for leading the group. “Try to reflect the character of what you’re about to play with your leading...if you play a limp lead, you’ll get limp playing.”



Each bit of wisdom Silverthorne imparts finds its way into the performance as the boys soak up his knowledge and coaching. Silverthorne is specific yet sympathetic, detailed yet encouraging. No small element of rhythm, dynamics, or phrasing escapes his notice. He’s clear about the need to listen and correct while playing; Silverthorne’s philosophy is that “when you stop and talk about what’s going on, you’re not making music...but when you listen and correct as you go along, you’re making music. Which is the whole point!” The session ends with all performers challenged, encouraged, and energized in their music-making.

Around the corner in Practice Room 1, SPCO's principal horn Bernhard Scully is running his wind ensemble through their paces on a Joseph Haydn *Divertimento*. The main focus for these players today – Katie Anne Kohler, flute, Erika Walden, oboe, Cameron Jarvis, clarinet, Jenna Pysick, horn, and Kyle Bright, bassoon – is contrast, phrasing, and dynamics. Scully demonstrates the dramatic arc of solo lines by singing in a pleasant light tenor. Drama is a continuing theme, and Scully stresses that “when you have dynamic changes, you have to make a really big deal out of it.” Scully has a huge breadth of experience to offer these young students – before joining the SPCO, he performed with the world-renowned Canadian Brass, and has conducted masterclasses for thousands of students. More importantly, Scully is a bit of a “home-town hero” with first-hand knowledge about GTCYS: he’s an alumnus. “I had such great experiences” he says, recalling his student years. For Scully, coaching is a way to continue his relationship with the organization.



The London Sinfonietta's Clio Gould, coaching a trio of students in Rehearsal Room B, refers often to her own learning experiences as she takes the ensemble through a Jan Vanhal *Trio in E flat*. Rebecca Hanson, violin, Jimmy Vogel, clarinet, and Liga Krievans, piano, listen and laugh when Gould tells how crushed she was as a young violin student when performing what she felt was a “massive crescendo” for her teacher – who then pointed out that there was actually a *crescendo* marked in her part. Gould's point is that it's vital to be bold and daring in contrast and dynamics. “Always look for the most creative thing to do with your part.”

At a *piano* marking, Gould insists that it be “almost comically quiet – I mean, make it *ridiculous*.” It's all a part of musical story-telling. At a particularly challenging rhythmic passage over which the trio stumbles several times, Gould shares that she annotates everything in her part. “Analyze why things are tripping you up. Often, we just try to soldier on – but you have to find another way, and mark it in. You can't put enough information in your part.”

This kind of detailed, personal coaching is a treasure for GTCYS' students, and a compliment too; it marks them as part of the lineage of students, teachers, and performers stretching back for generations. All these coaches share with GTCYS' young musicians the wisdom gained from accumulated years of practice and theory, and a wealth of insights from their own years as students, performers, and teachers.

I run into Collin Arneson and his dad waiting for the elevator at the end of the morning. We chat about the coaching he's received that day, and the lessons learned. Does he know how lucky he is? “Absolutely,” says Collin and his dad chimes in: “I keep telling him that!” We talk about the generosity of the SPCO and London Sinfonietta professionals in sharing their insights and experiences with GTCYS' young musicians. And here's the beauty part: while the students are learning how to *play*, they are also learning how to *teach*. Just as today's professional coaches stand on the shoulders of those who touched their lives as teachers and mentors, so will GTCYS' students take their place as the next generation in a proud musical continuum. Meanwhile...there's lots of practicing to do!

- Reported by Elizabeth Balay
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