

# A Third Grader's Guide to the

# Orchestra



Overview of Cary Hall filled with kids for Lexington Symphony 3rd grade program "Orchestrating Kids through Classics." Photo courtesy of Fred Johnson.

By Jane Whitehead

Cary Hall, Lexington, January 14. This was a symphony concert with a difference: the young Mozart played a violin solo and Darth Vader made a guest appearance, menacing an audience of over 600 third-graders with his light saber, to the sound of John Williams' stirring "Star Wars" theme.

The hour-long concert, given by the 50-strong Lexington Symphony Orchestra (LSO) under Music Director Jonathan McFee, was the centerpiece of "Orchestrating Kids Through Classics." LSO members and music teachers devised the outreach effort to introduce every third grader in Lexington public schools to the classical concert experience, and spark interest in the fourth and fifth-grade instrumental music program.

Walter Pavasaris, Coordinator of Fine and Performing Arts for Lexington Public Schools, applauded LSO concertmaster Liz Whitfield for her self-effacing, passionate championship of the program, both as a musician and an administrator. "She was the catalyst that made this thing really work," he said.

The program received major funding from Lexington Education Foundation (LEF), with additional support

from Friends of Lexington Music, Art and Drama Students (FOLMADS) and Target. "People in the Symphony are really committed to the idea of outreach to kids in the whole surrounding community," said former LEF Board member Cindy Lewis, who co-wrote the LEF grant application with LSO's Rebecca Hawkins.

The logistics were complex; in addition to mounting a full-scale concert, during the week beforehand, small groups of musicians visited every public elementary school in town to introduce themselves, their instruments, and their music to the entire third-grade.

### A Quartet in the Cafeteria

On a January morning soon after the winter break, one hundred third graders from Bowman Elementary School sat on the floor of the cafeteria, eyes fixed on violinists Liz

The monks sing plainchant to start off the program in the 1500's. Photo courtesy of Fred Johnson.



Diamond 6th grader Yuki Beppu, dressed as Mozart, performs Mozart's Violin Concerto No. 4 with Lexington Symphony. Photo courtesy of the Lexington Symphony.

Whitfield and Barbara Oren, tuba player Jobey Wilson and clarinetist Bill Kirkley.

"We've never had anything like this before, and I'm thrilled," said Bowman music teacher Martha Rogers, introducing the quartet. "Raise your hand if you've seen a symphony orchestra before," said Rogers, and at least 50 hands shot up. The group played the opening of John Williams' theme from the "Harry Potter" movies, to universal recognition. "That's an example of where we often get to hear symphony orchestra music," said Kirkley.

Concertmaster Liz Whitfield told the group that her 250-year old violin is "held together with animal glue and the strings used to be made of sheep intestines," to a chorus of "Gross!" and "Yuck!" She showed off the instrument's versatility, playing a melody from Dvorak's "New World" Symphony, plucking the strings, and playing over the bridge to make a shivery, "scary sound." To demystify one of the rituals of the symphony concert, she showed how, before the start of the program, she would turn her back on the audience and give the signal for the orchestra to begin tuning.

"Who can tell me what this large piece of plumbing in my hands is?" asked Jobey Wilson, hoisting his tuba. "Saxophone?" someone suggested. "We are the lowest playing of all the brass instruments," he said, blowing a basso farto

the instrument, to laughter. After taking out the mouthpiece and showing how he makes the sound by "lip buzzing," Wilson played part of the "Jaws" theme.

Kirkley held up a couple of different sized recorders, "the ancestor of all our woodwind instruments," and showed the difference between them and his modern clarinet, with its "bunch of silver levers." He played a few Gershwin-inspired slides and wails to show that woodwinds "make some of the sillier sounds in the orchestra."

"The kids are so excited," said Rogers, at the end of the session. "It's the perfect age to do this - they're just about to start playing recorder." What's important about these previews, said violinist Barbara Oren, is that they bridge the gap between the players

# Orchestrating Kids Through Classics



Above and left: Liz Whitfield demonstrates her violin. Below L to R: Barbara Oren, violin, Bill Kirkley, clarinet, Jobey Wilson, tuba, and Liz Whitfield, concertmaster, give an up-close demo of their instruments to prepare the 3rd graders from Fiske and Bowman Schools for the full orchestra concert a week later. Photos courtesy of Diane Sperandio.



and the audience. "You're regular people sharing what you've learned and love about your instrument," she said, "so they'll already have a connection when they see you on stage."

### Vader Invades

At 9.30 in the morning on January 14, the entire LSO, in full concert dress (black for the women, tuxedos for the men) is on stage at Cary Hall. Over six hundred third graders



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*[It's] "a real magical synergy that's now happening between (LSO) board members, players and the town."*

*Conductor,  
Jonathan McPhee*



and the young audience. "So many young people have really no contact – they think – with a classical orchestra," said McFee, but thanks to the work of musicians like Williams, they are familiar with the symphonic sound. The next step, said McFee, is to feed their curiosity about how the sounds are made.

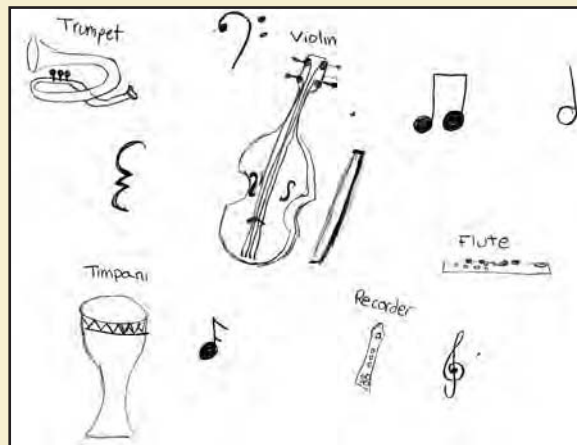
Yuki Beppu accepted bouquets and congratulations, and explained that she practices two or three hours a day. "I don't want to push the practice," said her mother, Yuku, a medical researcher at Massachusetts General Hospital. Boston Philharmonic Orchestra conductor Benjamin Zander gave her some good advice, said Yuku Beppu, when they met at a master class he was teaching a couple of years ago at NEC. "He told me, your job is to keep Yuki's eyes shining," she said. Leave the music, said Zander, to Yuki and her teachers, BSO violist Kazuko Matsusaka and former BSO concertmaster Joseph Silverstein.

"I couldn't be more thrilled that the children are being exposed to such exceptional music - this is the perfect introduction," said Ami Stix, ACT (Arts Created Together) Coordinator for Bridge School. Her nine-year-old son had been "going round imitating the tuba" ever since the preview session at Bridge, she said.

from Lexington and Arlington sit in expectant silence as the orchestra tunes, then Maestro Jonathan McFee bounds onstage to conduct the opening of the "Star Wars" theme, and a wave of excited recognition spreads through the audience. But after a few bars, the music abruptly stops, and all the musicians leave the stage.

McFee – a winner of the Gabriel Award for his work on WCRB's "Kid's Classical Hour" – explains that the earliest music in the Western tradition was for voices, rather than instruments. "I think I see some monks," he says, and dead on cue, four brown-robed singers process through the hall, intoning a medieval Gregorian plainsong chant.

Moving at a brisk clip – "We're doing the history of



Students sent thank-you notes to the Lexington Symphony and many students expressed their appreciation with artwork.  
*Courtesy of the Lexington Symphony.*

western music in one hour" – McFee introduces a band of "traveling minstrels" from the Renaissance, with recorders and drum, then adds oboes, trumpets and stringed instruments for a performance of part of Johann Sebastian Bach's Brandenburg Concerto Number 3, from the early eighteenth century.

The stage fills with new instruments; bassoons, flutes and French horns, and McFee conducts a section of Joseph Haydn's "Surprise" Symphony, Number 94. "Haydn had a good sense of humor," he says. "Listen for the surprise." There's some laughter at the sudden loud chord that disrupts the music's sedate progress.

But perhaps the biggest surprise of the morning is the performance of guest violin soloist and Diamond sixth-grader Yuki Beppu, 11, who comes onstage in knee-breeches and white powdered wig to play part of Mozart's Violin Concerto No. 4 in D major. With the first stroke of her bow Beppu transforms from schoolgirl into accomplished musician. McFee later describes how he first heard Beppu play at the New England Conservatory, where she studies in the Preparatory school and

plays in the Trio Con Brio (with pianist Daniel Kim, a student at Clarke Middle School.) "I was just bowled over by her. Such confidence, such control, such musicianship," says McFee.

After Beppu's bravura display, McFee introduces Beethoven (via a cell-phone ringtone rip-off of the opening notes of the Fifth Symphony), Tchaikovsky, and finally, Stravinsky. "Stravinsky told stories that people had never heard," says McFee, describing the tumultuous first US performance of "The Rite of Spring," in 1924, during which most of the audience left. The Cary Hall audience is getting a little wiggly itself, until, with the full firepower of the modern orchestra assembled on stage, McFee launches once more into "Star Wars," this time blaring triumphantly through to the end. Darth Vader appears, black-cloaked, brandishing his light saber, and half the audience begins to conduct.

### Coda

"I loved that – it was better than the movie!" one third-grade boy told McFee after the concert, underscoring the organizers' savvy choice of film music as a bridge between classical music

Other third graders were equally enthusiastic. "It was the best music I ever heard," wrote Nathaniel Keyes, from Fiske, in a classroom follow-up session after the concert. "My feelings were flowing with the music. It was like Cary Hall's stage was sparkling," wrote Bowman's Alia Rizvi, while Evan Fang of Harrington said: "I might be a lot more interested in playing my piano and my recorder more often."

The whole program, said McFee, shows "a real magical synergy that's now happening between (LSO) board members, players and the town." That collaboration, said Walter Pavasaris, has led to "a wonderful opportunity for students to be able to hear a high-caliber orchestra," and to learn from experience that "music can be made by people of all ages and from all walks of life." That is a lesson that will last long after third grade is over.

"It's all about staying connected."