

20 YEARS WITH YOUTHFUL ORCHESTRAS, AND THEY'VE GOT 'THE BEST ONE IN TOWN'

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It's midmorning Saturday at Highland Park junior and senior highs. In the junior high auditorium, Claudette Laureano faces the Repertory Orchestra of the Minnesota Youth Symphonies, tapping her baton as music resonates throughout the room. Instrument cases fill the auditorium seats.

"Let's make a little passion out of this. It sounds so dry right now," Claudette says. "One, two, ready and one." The music starts again.

Just down the hall, sounds seep from the junior high cafeteria, where instrument cases line the walls, just below signs for "A La Carte" and the "Dish Room." Lunch tables are replaced by brown folding chairs that arc around Claudette's husband, Manny Laureano, who conducts the youth symphonies' top-tier Symphony Orchestra.

Minnesota Youth Symphonies, home to four youth orchestras, will honor the Laureanos' 20 years as co-artistic directors during its own 35th anniversary season. The celebration begins Sunday at Orchestra Hall with the orchestras' first performances of the season, which include a guest appearance by Cuban pianist Ignacio "Nachito" Herrera and the premiere of a composition competition winner. Throughout the concert season, Minnesota Youth Symphonies' orchestras will debut works commissioned from Minnesota composers.

"It's a chance, challenge to play top-notch music that most people don't play 'til college," said Katie Bauerfeind, youth symphonies bassoonist from Wayzata High School. "Just the chance to grow as a musician and play with some really awesome, talented people."

The orchestras' repertoires have risen to such a high caliber under the direction of the Laureanos that last year the Symphony Orchestra performed Igor Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring."

"You're not supposed to be able to play that in high school," said Jim Bartsch, conductor of the youth symphonies' Philharmonic Orchestra and director of educational activities at Minnesota Orchestra.

Bartsch recognizes that every youth music program is different but thinks "the really powerful thing" is "the fact that (Minnesota Youth Symphonies) brings together so many really talented and hard-working kids together from all around the community."

"It's not your average high school kid that's going to say, 'Oh, well, that's for me,' " Manny said. "It's going to be the unique kid who's extremely serious about music and willing to put up with what it takes to make an orchestra sing the way you want it to sing. And ultimately, that's what you're doing, is that you're giving a group of kids a voice, voices within a larger voice; their individual voice creates something very beautiful and very unique."

Manny, a graduate of the Juilliard School, is principal trumpet for the Minnesota Orchestra; Claudette, a graduate of the Manhattan School of Music, is the string director at Breck School in Golden Valley.

The Laureanos were first introduced to the organization in the early '80s, when they were hired as sectional coaches for a year or two, said Claudette, but didn't come back to Minnesota Youth Symphonies until they were hired as directors in 1988.

"When we first came, there were about 65 kids in the entire program, and that first year we ended with 120," Claudette said. "And it's been incredibly gratifying to watch first the numbers increase, and with the numbers, the caliber just shot way up."

Manny said that when they first began, he and Claudette brought "back the discipline along with the enthusiasm for music because it seems like you can't have one without the other."

"My teacher told me to join MYS," said Max Lundgren, cellist in the Symphony Orchestra. "He just said, 'It's time for you to join an orchestra.' And this was what he said was the best one in town."

ABOUT MYS

What: Minnesota Youth Symphonies; made up of four youth orchestras; welcomes serious musicians K-12

When: Founded in 1972

Artistic directors: Manny and Claudette Laureano, celebrating 20 years with the orchestras

CONCERTS

Sunday: 35th Anniversary Season begins, 6:30 p.m. Sunday at Orchestra Hall, 1111 Nicollet Mall, Mpls.; guest appearance by Ignacio "Nachito" Herrera, Cuban pianist, with a premiere performance by the MYS Anniversary Composition Competition winner

Dec. 8: String Orchestra Holiday Concert.

Feb. 24, 2008: Premiere performance of a work by Edward "Teddy" Niedermaier, MYS alumnus, and winners of MYS Solo Competition perform

April 19, 2008: MYS Composers Recital

May 4, 2008: Grand Finale of the 35th Anniversary Season. World premiere of work by Stephen Paulus written specifically for the Symphony Orchestra and work by Shelley Hanson, nationally recognized composer

IN NUMBERS

Third grade: Youngest player in MYS this year

Four orchestras: String, Philharmonic, Repertory and Symphony

10th year: Patricia Kelley, String Orchestra conductor

16 years: Of rehearsing in the Highland senior and junior high schools

17th year: Jim Bartsch, Philharmonic Orchestra conductor

20th year: Manny and Claudette Laureano, artistic directors

35th year: Minnesota Youth Symphonies

64: Number of students performing in the String Orchestra for the first concert

79: Number of students performing in the Philharmonic Orchestra for the first concert

91: Number of students performing in the Repertory Orchestra for the first concert

108: Number of students performing in the Symphony Orchestra for the first concert