

After tutoring by the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, Manhattan School of Music's Chamber Sinfonia performed a conductorless concert last spring at Merkin Concert Hall.

R. Andrew Lepley



ORPHEUS

New York's famed conductorless orchestra teaches conservatory students the arts of collaborative music-making and organizational efficiency.

"Ensemble is always helped by musical intent. Don't be cautious; be confident. Give body language together. Try to concentrate on what type of character you want to bring to the piece." Nardo Poy, a violist in New York's Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, is addressing a group of Manhattan School of Music students during their tentative reading of Bruce Broughton's Tuba Concerto. Under Orpheus's tutelage the group will also prepare *The Unanswered Question* by Charles Ives, Darius Milhaud's *La Création du monde*, and the Suite from Copland's *Appalachian Spring*, as orchestrated by the composer. The students are being schooled in the art of playing without a conductor. They have

selected this repertoire on their own, and their efforts will culminate in a concert by the Manhattan School of Music Chamber Sinfonia, to be performed sans conductor at New York's Merkin Concert Hall.

The collaboration between the Manhattan School's Orchestral Performance Program and Orpheus was inaugurated in 2003, the joint brainchild of Orpheus members and Manhattan School administrators hoping to endow students with techniques of cooperative musicianship and other marketable skills. Last year the orchestra extended its mentoring to another group of students, establishing the Orpheus Institute @ The Juilliard School. Fall seminars at Juilliard focused on mar-

keting, management, and orchestral programming. Activities during the second semester afforded orchestral students a chance to observe and participate in Orpheus rehearsals of such works as Beethoven's Eighth Symphony and Mendelssohn's Third; gave composition students an opportunity to watch the Orpheus musicians prepare new works by Marc Mellits and Joan Tower for their world premieres at Carnegie Hall; and further exposed the Juilliard students to an orchestra's inner workings with seminars on governance and fund raising led by, respectively, Orpheus Chairman Connie Steensma and Director of Development Mary Esbjornson.

What sets Orpheus apart from most orchestras, of course, is its ability to play brilliantly without a conductor, in repertoire that ranges far beyond the smaller-scale works of the Baroque and Classical eras. The Manhattan School students rehearsing Broughton's Tuba Concerto had numerous questions for each other. "Are we rushing? Where should we start? How does it sound from the audience? How big should we make our cues? Can we make it more exciting dynamically? Can the articulations be more precise?" Nardo Poy was on hand to help, explaining and demonstrating methods Orpheus has honed since its inception in 1972. When the players inadvertently slowed down during a dynamic shift to *piano*, Poy said, "If you sense people slowing down you have to have enough strength in your playing that others follow you." As Dan Peck, the student who was performing as tuba soloist, observed during a break in the rehearsal, "Usually the conductor is the

intermediary. You have to ask something, and he then relays that idea to the group." Without a conductor, he said, "there was more pressure at the beginning, but now it's fun. Sometimes you say something just to fill the silence, like 'Let's start at bar 15.' It makes you realize how often conductors must do that."

The Manhattan School's program traces its origins to the day when David Geber, dean of performance, approached Orpheus Managing Director Ronnie Bauch about coaching the school's Chamber Sinfonia. Bauch says that Orpheus was eager to collaborate with Manhattan, since the orchestra's musicians knew the strengths and weaknesses of conservatory

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training and felt they had something unique to offer. Orpheus had completed a successful residency in 2000 at the Paris Conservatory, where they prepared a conductorless concert with students. "It was a dramatic start, as we had about 75 people playing!" Bauch laughs. He recalls the excitement that Orpheus musicians felt as they began the Manhattan program, which suddenly afforded them a glimpse of themselves as they were starting out 25 years ago. The pilot program drew only five students, and Orpheus selected the repertoire. By the second year there was significant student interest, and players were taught to program their own concerts, something

Goes to School

by Vivien Schweitzer



James Eng/Orpheus Chamber Orchestra

Orpheus cellist Jonathan Spitz works with Juilliard student Michael Nicolas; participants in the new Orpheus Institute @ Juilliard were given a chance to lead the professional musicians in rehearsal prior to Orpheus's concert at Carnegie Hall last March.

that none of them had done before. "To get the ball rolling we worked with a small group of students, and it was really fantastic," says Bauch. "They selected the repertoire, came to our office and looked at our archives. It was 'programming 101,' and it added to the sense of ownership the students had over this program."

Orpheus General Director Graham Parker describes the Institute @ Juilliard as "all encompassing." A year-long program, it builds on the one-semester Manhattan program with what Orpheus calls "tools classes." During these sessions Orpheus members work with ensembles of eight to ten players on interpretation and cuing—the latter a component of working con-

ductorless that students found particularly challenging. Violinist Sarah Crocker, for example, discovered that “there are different ways string and wind players cue, so when I was leading the ensemble, the way I would cue my colleagues in the string section didn’t always work for the winds.”

The tools classes, says Bauch, are also designed to help students explore issues of group dynamics and management. “Students are never encouraged to speak up during normal orchestra rehearsals,” he says. “We want to help them find their own voice, give them confidence that what they have to say is important. They need to know how to express themselves, and how to deal with having their ideas rejected. So this was a new angle of the institute.” For the institute’s second year, which begins in September, many of the same elements will be offered, and a conductorless student chamber orchestra will also be created; Parker says that James DePreist, Juilliard’s director of conducting and orchestral studies, is strongly supportive of the idea of an Orpheus-style orchestra.

Along with passing on its artistic ensemble skills, Orpheus is eager to instruct the next generation in its collaborative administrative methods. (The orchestra has three musicians on its board of directors, while repertoire and personnel decisions, scheduling and programming are all the responsibility of the musicians.) So the pilot program at Juilliard included seminars on management, programming, governance, finance, and development to pique and develop student interest in all aspects of the orchestra. Students were also offered Orpheus internships in such areas as marketing and development.

Bauch says students are interested in learning about administration “because it stems from the artistic aspect of the program, and

gives us credibility. We are successful musicians, but also involved in other areas. I went to a conservatory and I know that these are not things you think about. But in the field today and in the future, they will be critical areas for musicians to understand. The era of just taking a job and playing rehearsals and concerts is over. You can see that the landscape is changing dramatically.”

New Blood

Bauch notes that Orpheus’s motivation for working with students at Manhattan and Juilliard is “not completely altruistic. Ultimately we’re looking to regenerate Orpheus, so the more opportunities we have to work with very highly skilled and talented students, the more people who will be around with the skills to play with us. It’s not easy; we can’t just take someone off the street.” Three Juilliard students joined Orpheus at Carnegie Hall for its March concert with percussionist Evelyn Glennie, and at one of the rehearsals leading up to it students actually got a chance to lead the professional musicians. Parker says the group is “excited about this new blood. Anyone who is successful at Orpheus has to be a well-rounded technician and really have something to say about the music. They must have spent time studying the score and be able to walk into rehearsals thinking about how it will be shaped.”

Teaching students how to shape the music and focus their priorities are important aspects of Orpheus’s coaching. Eriko Sato, a violinist who has played with the orchestra for more than 25 years, notes that one of the challenges is teaching students how to let go of problems without falling into a rut. “You need to say ‘let’s sleep on it and try

Violinist Eriko Sato notes that one challenge is teaching students how to let go. “You need to say ‘let’s sleep on it and try it another day.’ Sometimes it’s okay not to have everything perfect right away.”



Ken Nahoum, Edge Films

Students rehearsing Bruce Broughton’s Tuba Concerto had numerous questions for each other. Violist Nardo Poy was on hand to help, demonstrating methods Orpheus has used since its inception.



Ken Nahoum, Edge Films

it another day.’ You have to look at the big picture. Details are important, but sometimes it’s okay not to have everything perfect right away,” she told Manhattan students during their preparations for the Merkin Hall concert.

A rehearsal of Milhaud’s *La Création du monde* inspired a lot of debate. “Think about the color and the sound quality—it’s French music,” suggested Sato. One student piped up, “We need to decide whether the saxophone is a melody or an accompaniment.” To which his colleague responded, “The sax part says *chanteur*; other parts don’t say that, so it’s clear the sax is an important voice.” Another felt that “French music is all about the impressions, so the saxophone should be on top.” His

colleague disagreed, saying, “Just because there are higher instruments doesn’t mean it should be top heavy. We should strive for a darker sound.” But another student didn’t like that idea, and yet another thought: “It sounds too German, too harsh at the beginning; we need a more French sound.”

Manhattan student Tim Dodge, one of the Chamber Sinfonia’s three clarinetists, described the process of bouncing ideas around in a large ensemble as “incredibly difficult and stressful, but ultimately worthwhile. The rehearsal process was exhilarating or mind-numbing, depending on the day. There are a lot of personality conflicts, and you have to define what you want to get out of the music—without offending others, and incorporating their ideas. We’ve all played chamber music, but that’s with six people maximum. Suddenly you have 20 people with different sets of ideas, and you have to piece it all together. With a conductor, even if you disagree with his interpretation, it’s just one mind. The better you are as a musician, the more ideas you have. It’s important to let things go, but some people have a hard time with giving and taking.”

Sato described a student rehearsal two years ago at Manhattan as painful to watch.

She tried to let them work things out, but it was frustrating because she knew where the discussion would end. “I had to step in and tell them to stop before reaching a dead end, because once you stonewall it’s really hard to retreat. It’s like being a psychologist—you have to really understand and tune into people’s feelings. We have to teach the students how to change the momentum and go in a different direction, how to be more flexible in their thinking. It’s a very subtle, intuitive thing.” She finds that students tend to focus too narrowly on technical matters, and has sometimes felt obliged to remind them to think about the *music*. The most important message to get across, she says, is how to establish mutual musical goals.

Another crucial lesson is time management—something that Orpheus musicians learned for themselves after endless chaotic rehearsals in the group’s early days. Sato tells students to be prepared, and to figure out how much time they’ll need on a particular section. “We learned that you can argue about one point for hours, but then the rehearsal is over. The difficulty about being in Orpheus is that sometimes the end result is not as you wished for. Perhaps you wanted a different interpretation. But there are always other chances to do it, and you aren’t stuck with that interpretation forever.”

Bassoonist Steven Dibner was an Orpheus member for about 20 years before taking a job with the San Francisco Symphony in 1995. He still subs with the group and led a workshop at Manhattan last spring. Dibner described it as a great opportunity to use his ideas of how Orpheus could work better and more efficiently; he suggested that one student might harp on everyone about dynamics, for example, while another points out tempo problems and another checks for balance. “I told them to delegate responsibility to avoid wasting time.”

Juilliard violinist Sarah

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Ken Nahum, Edge Films

Crocker agreed that, after cueing, time management was indeed the biggest challenge. Orchestra players, both in a conservatory and elsewhere, are used to relying on a conductor to plan out the rehearsal. “But with Orpheus, musicians are responsible. So one person was usually given clock duty, although those are decisions you have to make as a group. You feel that you never have enough time to get through everything, but you try to plan rehearsal time well.”

Orpheus members believe their coaching has made students more confident. “There’s a bit of an inferiority complex in instrumental musicians,” says Bauch, “especially when you play in an orchestra for a long time. The point of this program is that it’s not necessary to feel like that.” A superb rehearsal of Wagner’s *Siegfried Idyll* by the Juilliard Chamber Orchestra for its March concert at Carnegie’s Weill Recital Hall certainly indicated a high level of confidence. Such Romantic works as this can be hard to play Orpheus-style because of the *rubato* and interpretive leeway they require, but this ensemble was impressive in its musicality, balance, and vigor. Cellist Sabine Frick, a German graduate diploma student, found it was “more fun with no conductor, but also more tiring—you always have to be listening closely to what everyone else is doing.” Her colleague, Polish oboist Maciej Bosak, also a graduate diploma student, agreed. “Without a conductor you work harder. You have to study the score more before you rehearse.”

Students, administrators, and Orpheus members seem enthusiastic about the program thus far. Manhattan’s David Geber thinks that Orpheus may represent a viable model for the future: “More and more students want to take

Manhattan’s David Geber thinks that Orpheus may represent a viable model for the future: “More and more students want to take ownership themselves.”



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ownership themselves. It’s amazing that Orpheus has been around so long and there haven’t been more [conductorless orchestras].” And Robert H. Smith Jr., the school’s director of orchestral performance and community outreach, believes working with Orpheus has made the students better all-round players. “It’s teaching them finer ways to communicate and work with their colleagues. They learn what it takes to plan the research, the programs, the rehearsals, the concerts,” he says, adding that the older students are “generally more comfortable” with this than the others.

Clarinetist Tim Dodge notes that the coaching process was difficult,

but it was satisfying to see the music germinate and come to fruition. While he doesn’t enjoy playing without a conductor as much as with one, he believes it would probably become easier with more experience. And he notes that the level of preparation and responsibility required to play conductorless made him work much harder. “Orchestra players typically know their own part and that of the players immediately around them, but not at the level of depth that this required.”

The students discovered what Orpheus members have known for decades—that some musicians find the process of working without a conductor exhilarating, while others find it frustrating. But the young musicians being trained seemed enthusiastic enough that perhaps Orpheus will soon see its collaborative methods reflected in a new generation of conductorless orchestras. As Geber sees it, “The skills Orpheus members have, such as how to use time effectively or plan repertoire, are things that conservatory students are notoriously bad at. They are so used to a personnel manager or conductor telling them what to do. But in the 21st century, people need to know how to be proactive. It’s a broader sense of what it means to be a musician.” ∞

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