

Bridging

the Generations

by Martin Steinberg

Intergenerational orchestras boast a unique dynamic: an eight-year-old might share a music stand with an octogenarian. These avocational ensembles also foster improved self-confidence, mental sharpness and physical fitness, and wide community participation in orchestral music.



Marty Steinberg



Zoe d'Amico, seventeen, and Peter Vernon, 77, both play in the New Jersey Intergenerational Orchestra.

How do you motivate students? That's the million-dollar question, especially for music teachers. Lorraine Marks-Field addressed the issue early in her career as an instrumental teacher by remembering her own experience. As a thirteen-year-old violist, she accepted her teacher's invitation to play chamber music with him and his colleagues. "Although I wasn't very good, they were very encouraging to me," she recalls. "They kept telling me I could get better if I kept practicing." She did, but when she became a public school music teacher in Cranford, New Jersey, she realized she needed to find a way to motivate her students to practice. "I said to myself, 'What would happen if I put together my stu-

dents with some older adults, and maybe they would encourage them to practice?'"

That idea blossomed into the New Jersey Intergenerational Orchestra. After getting financial support from local government for instruments and lessons, Marks-Field advertised the first rehearsal and set up 30 seats. Seventy-two people of all ages showed up. "I was so overwhelmed! I didn't have enough music, but everyone wanted to be a part of it," she says. "It was so great!" Marks-Field divided the group into a beginning ensemble, a symphony orchestra, and a chamber orchestra. She scheduled weekly evening rehearsals. The repertoire ranged from easy music like "Chicken Dance" to inter-

mediate and advanced student editions of show tunes and classical works. Within a few years, she led NJIO in performances at Damrosch Park in New York's Lincoln Center, at the United Nations, and even in Spain for the U.N. World Conference on Aging, in 2002.



Lorraine Marks-Field, founder of both the New Jersey Intergenerational Orchestra and the Florida Intergenerational Orchestra, taught music in public schools for many years. She started NJIO originally as a way to motivate students by putting them together with older adults.

Now in its 25th season, the New Jersey Intergenerational Orchestra is an organization of more than 130 musicians, ranging in age from 8 to about 80 and with varying levels of experience. There are no auditions. The only requirements are to have an instrument and the confidence to play with others. (Full disclosure: I have served as a cello coach at the New Jersey Intergenerational Orchestra since 2004.) The orchestra gives three to four concerts a season, most featuring a concerto played by a professional musician or the winner of a student solo competition, often from the Juilliard School. In addition to the three orchestral levels, NJIO now has a flute choir, a summer chamber music workshop, and a small ensemble that plays at senior centers. It also has started sending musicians to retirement communities to encourage the residents to start to play an instrument. Its motto is to “bridge the generations through music.”

One of NJIO's first members was Len Avdey, who joined as a 45-year-old computer engineer and novice cellist. “I was taking group lessons for six months,” Avdey recalls, “and the teacher said, ‘Okay, you’re good enough to play in an orchestra,’ and I said, ‘Get out of here! I only know

what the strings are, A, D, G, C!’ I sat in the back at NJIO and I struggled. But I kept coming back every week, saying, ‘This is going to make me better.’” Avdey, now 70 and retired, says the orchestra has kept him feeling young: “It’s helpful in keeping your mind active and sharp. It slows down the aging process.”

East Coast, West Coast, and In Between

NJIO is one of the older intergenerational orchestras that have sprouted independently around the United States. Others include the Intergeneration Orchestra of Omaha, founded in 1985; the Wisconsin Intergenerational Orchestra near Milwaukee; the Tidewater Intergenerational Orchestra in southeastern Virginia; the Emerson Intergenerational Orchestra in Houston; the Foothills Phil Intergenerational Orchestra in Tucson, Arizona; and the Florida Intergenerational Orchestra in Boca Raton. The Albany Area Senior Orchestra in New York State, founded in 1977, is made up mostly of senior citizens; they perform for retirement communities, nursing homes, senior centers, and assisted-living facilities, led by Vincent Bonafede, a former longtime music educator. Florida’s Naples Orchestra and Cho-

cian orchestra with players ranging from senior citizens to people in their forties and fifties. Sometimes the term “multigenerational” is used, as is the case at South Puget Sound Community College in Washington State, where an orchestra of SPSCC students and community musicians was formed in 2014.

Whether they are called intergenerational or multigenerational, such orchestras reflect a wider trend to promote healthy aging through lifelong learning, including participation in the arts.

Intergenerational orchestras reflect a wider trend to promote healthy aging through lifelong learning, including participation in the arts.

Multiple studies have noted quality-of-life benefits: sustained mental sharpness from reading music and fitness and coordination from playing a musical instrument. Listening to music is also beneficial. A 2017 National Endowment for the Arts survey on public participation in the arts showed that nearly 54 percent of the U.S.



The Florida Intergenerational Orchestra's violin section spans many ages, including the seven-year-old seen above.

rus is an all-volunteer intergenerational community orchestra founded in 1993 that performs a regular four-concert season, with professional guest artists, under Artistic Director Max Rabinovitsj. Symphonic Pops of Long Island, formerly known as the Senior Pops, is a 60-musi-

adult population participated in the arts over the past fifteen years. Still, some older Americans lack opportunities to stay connected with music, and an increasing number of orchestras are getting involved. These are somewhat different challenges from those of engaging, say, millennial

audiences: many members of the baby-boomer and older generations already know and love classical music but may be limited by physical and other impairments. In 2018, the Detroit Symphony Orchestra installed a closed-circuit, WiFi-enabled hearing-assistance system at Orchestra Hall, in partnership with the Michigan Ear Institute. Audience members with hearing loss can download a smartphone or mobile app and listen to concerts in the hall using their own headphones or equipment that the hall provides. Similarly, when Ohio's Canton Symphony upgraded its concert hall in 2012, it installed a hearing loop allowing those with T-coil-equipped hearing aids to hear performances without background noise. For people not able to get to a concert hall, there are increasing options. California's Santa Rosa

“When you look at two individuals playing the violin and you have someone who is an elementary student sitting next to someone who is in their seventies, you might wonder what could they possibly have in common? But the age really makes no difference,” says Chris Gillette, project director and co-founder of Nebraska’s Intergeneration Orchestra of Omaha.

Symphony recently launched a pops series at Luther Burbank Center for the Arts in partnership with Carlton Senior Living, which is building new residences within walking distance of the arts center. In the Florida Youth Orchestra’s “Generations” series, FYO ensembles perform free concerts at senior centers, assisted living facilities, nursing homes, and recreation centers in Broward County. And there has been a surge of initiatives by orchestras that use music to improve the lives of people with memory loss.

One of the more intriguing experiments in recent years involves conservatory students and senior living facilities. At the Peabody Conservatory’s Musician-in-



Members of the Omaha Intergeneration Orchestra (left to right) Mary Thomsen, Cheri Moore, Kyle Perry, and Kim Vawter.

Residence project, launched in 2015, students receive free housing at Springwell Senior Living and Broadmead retirement communities, in exchange for regular open practice sessions and performances at the residences. A similar program at the Cleveland Institute of Music provides free apartments for students at Cleveland’s Judson Manor, a residence for seniors.



Chuck Penington has been conductor of Intergeneration Orchestra of Omaha since it was founded 33 years ago.

Students and seniors both have positive things to report; apart from the obvious economic benefit, students appreciate becoming almost like family members to the residents, and seniors enjoy the high quality of the music, up close. These living arrangements might be considered an offshoot of the broader co-housing movement: living communities of people with shared interests that are designed to facilitate interaction among neighbors.

Benefits to Old and Young

Perhaps the country’s oldest intergenerational orchestra is in Nebraska. Led by conductor Chuck Penington since its inception 33 years ago, the Intergeneration Orchestra of Omaha specializes in pop music and includes vocalists. It performs seven concerts a season, including a “Pops & Pie” fundraiser at which guests are served pop music and pie à la mode. Over the years, its musicians have ranged in age from ten to people in their nineties, and it has performed in places including Mount Rushmore and even the grounds of the White House, in 1995.

Members are auditioned by Penington, who is also associated with Mannheim Steamroller, the classical/new-age/rock group. They must be either above age 50 or below age 25. “We just decided from the beginning we wanted to be a little more specific with the age division,” says Chris Gillette, the orchestra’s project director and co-founder.

The orchestra’s logo is a rose stem connecting a fully bloomed flower and an offshoot topped with a bud. “From an audience member’s perspective, when you look at two individuals playing the violin and you have someone who is an elementary student sitting next to someone who is in their seventies, you might wonder what could they possibly have in common? But the age really makes no difference,” says Gillette, a nonmusician who works for the Eastern Nebraska Office of Aging. “When they are playing the same sheet of music, the old person can guide and give tips to the younger person, but I am confident that there are things that the younger person [can bring] to the perspective of the older musician’s viewpoint also. It’s a two-way street, and when they are playing the same music, the age doesn’t matter.”

For the older players in the New Jer-



Pam Klein

Musicians of the Intergeneration Orchestra of Omaha, which specializes in pop music and includes vocalists. Over the years it has performed at Mount Rushmore and at the White House.

sey Intergenerational Orchestra, “there’s something inspirational about sitting next to somebody who is young and learning and still has that enthusiasm,” says Warren Cohen, now in his fifth season as NJIO’s artistic director. “I think that keeps people fresh. As the younger ones get good, that puts the older people under pressure to keep their chops up.” Conversely, he adds, “young people learn that great rule, which is experience beats

youth and skill all the time. So they learn all the ways you can handle the problems that come up when you can’t necessarily play the passage.” For NJIO’s 25th season, Cohen selected works including Schubert’s “Unfinished” and Dvořák’s “New World” symphonies. The Dvořák is especially challenging, but “I knew a lot of people wanted to play it,” he says. “I put that as a goal and we did a lot of things as we were prepping for it. I think



Marty Sternberg

Warren Cohen is now in his fifth season as New Jersey Intergenerational Orchestra’s artistic director.

and plans to major in music in college. “It all started when I was in middle school playing in the back of the second violin section, kind of air bowing along, trying to figure out what’s going on,” she says. “It’s hard to believe I came so far.” Then there’s 77-year-old Peter Vernon, who started playing in his native Budapest but put his violin away for 53 years, returning to the fiddle four years ago, at age 73. “The itch was still there,” he says. “Whatever skill I had had eroded, to be honest. But on my bucket list was the dream of playing good music with my peers.” So Vernon found a teacher and—eventually—NJIO. “I remember very distinctly



Marty Sternberg

Two aspiring cellists, members of the New Jersey Intergenerational Orchestra. The orchestra’s members range in age from 8 to about 80, and perform in one of three different ensembles, depending on the level of experience.

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Oboist Don Barron, 88, is a member of the Florida Intergenerational Orchestra. His stand partner is Olivia Oakland, fifteen. "She's not a granddaughter—but she's like one," he says.

the very first concert I played in. I was thrilled out of my mind to be here." Violin and viola teacher Mary Babiarz says NJIO is the perfect community orchestra for her beginning adult students and

In his sixties and contemplating what he was going to do during retirement, Don Barron, a member of the Florida Intergenerational Orchestra, opened his oboe case. "My reed was 25 years old, but it played. It was fine," he says.

those who returned to their instrument after years of not playing: "The fact that they also may be paired with a child or teenager is an added bonus. The intergenerational situation is a win-win for all."

In 2005, Marks-Field founded a second orchestra, the Florida Intergenerational Orchestra, after she moved from New Jersey to the Sunshine State. Based in Boca Raton, the orchestra has about 65 musicians from age ten to 100, divided into a full orchestra and a more advanced chamber orchestra. "We never turn anybody away," Marks-Field says. The cen-

tenarian is Mel Lazerick, who didn't start playing an instrument until he was 98 (see sidebar). A somewhat younger and more experienced musician in the Florida orchestra is 88-year-old oboist Don Barron, a Massachusetts snowbird who winters in Delray Beach. He plays even though he uses a breathing machine for his emphysema. "Don't forget, when you're playing oboe, you're not breathing in. You're blowing out," he says. "The only time I really use the oxygen is when I'm not playing or I have a rest. But if I have to take a breath, you can't take a breath through your nose. I have to gulp air quickly, so I have to really breathe quickly and through my mouth because I can get more air. That's how players play. They take a fast, deep breath through their mouth. So the oxygen machine is just an assist. It doesn't really help me play." The Brooklyn native started playing oboe at age fourteen and went to Manhattan School of Music but eventually set it aside while he worked as a schoolteacher. In his sixties and contemplating what he was going to do during retirement, he ruled out golf and opened his oboe case. "My reed was 25 years old, but it played. It was fine," he said. "I played and I played and I played from that time until now. And I'm still playing." During the summers, he plays with the Stock-



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bridge Sinfonia, a community orchestra in Stockbridge, Massachusetts.

In the Florida orchestra, Barron sits next to a fifteen-year-old oboist, Olivia Oakland, whom he has mentored since she joined the group five years ago. At her first rehearsal, Oakland recalls, "I was a little nervous, because I was really worried what people would think. I was always flat or sharp. I wasn't very good at the beginning. But everyone was very nice and welcoming to me, so I wasn't very nervous after that." She says Barron helped build her confidence. Barron returns the compliment. "She played very nicely for a 10-year-old," says Barron. "It helped me. She could do much more than I could. I'd decide where I wanted to play second, where I wanted to

play first. She's now playing first. She plays rings around me. I wasn't her oboe teacher, but I taught her how to play in an orchestra. She's not a granddaughter—but she's like one."

Oakland adds, "Sometimes the other kids can sometimes be more judgmental. Older people can be more understanding and they definitely seem to be a little bit nicer." **S**

MARTIN STEINBERG is an editor at CNBC.com and was for many years an editor and writer at the Associated Press. A professional cellist, he has been cello coach at the New Jersey Intergenerational Orchestra since 2004, performs with numerous orchestras and at private events in the New York tristate area, and teaches cello privately.

Centenarian Spotlight

Florida Intergenerational Orchestra's Mel Lazerick, age 100 (right), didn't start playing an instrument until he was 98. The retired paving contractor from Cleveland started on triangle and now also plays chimes and tambourine. Living in the Boca Raton complex where the orchestra rehearses makes it easy for him to participate.



Q: How did you get involved with the orchestra?

Lazerick: I was visiting the conductor, Lorraine Field. She gave me a triangle and she said, 'Go ahead!' I said, 'I don't know anything about playing that!' She says, 'When I point to it, you hit it!' I had a little bit of knowledge about music, but I can't read it.

Q: What kind of musical training did you have?

Lazerick: (Laughs) None.

Q: What made you want to get involved?

Lazerick: I thought it was fun. I love music and evidently I didn't disturb the orchestra, and I enjoyed being one of them. They are really nice people.

Q: Do you interact a lot with the younger people in the orchestra?

Lazerick: I like the idea that it's anywhere from ten years old up to my age. I thought it was kind of unique.

Q: Is it inspiring to play with younger people?

Lazerick: I love watching them. At that

age they have the knowledge and the ability to play instruments like violins and cellos, and that makes it very exciting.

Q: How many more years do you look forward to doing this?

Lazerick: I'd like to do it for about ten more years, then I'll be 110. Right now, I'm looking forward to 101, then we'll go from there.

Q: Does doing this make you feel younger?

Lazerick: Absolutely, yeah, yeah. I feel great when I walk into the room there and I'm one of their idols because they don't know how I got in the door.

Q: When you play percussion, there are a lot of rests. Do you count the measures when you aren't playing?

Lazerick: Lorraine points to me when she wants me to hit the triangle, and I take it from there.

Q: Did you find any special technique that makes a better sound?

Lazerick: (Laughs) No. I try not to hit my fingers.

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