

Young at Heart

Children's concerts, family concerts, kinderkonzerts—no matter what you call them, orchestras are making music an essential part of the lives of the next generations. Tips and updates from folks on the front lines.

by Keith Powers



Michael Miller, a member of the Cleveland Orchestra's trumpet section, is an active presenter of kids concerts. Above, Miller with students at Wilbur Wright Elementary School in 2017.

BREAKING NEWS: KIDS ARE PEOPLE.

Stating the obvious has limited use, but when big people try to talk to little people, returning to basics seems necessary. Especially if big people in orchestras are trying to coax little people in audiences into becoming the audience of the future. There are some guidelines for concerts for young people.

Keep it short.

Keep it great.

Focus on the music.

No talking—for the adults. (The kids can talk a bit.)

Young people's concerts have grown in popularity over the years, and while motivations vary, one goal is straightforward: get them hooked early, and they'll

be hooked for life. But just like the Young People's Concerts that Leonard Bernstein used to influence a generation of young Americans via television (hand raised here), the challenges of striking the right balance are still the same. Adults love music for its complexity and emotional variety. Kids live in the moment. Their perceptions of the music are vastly different.

How different? Eleanor Powers Jones is a ten-year old flutist from Rockport, Mass. (Full disclosure: Eleanor is my granddaughter.) She has already had multiple concert experiences, thanks to a better-than-usual music program in her school, and the presence of an education-minded presenter, Rockport Music, right in her own town. Her memories of a visit with grandparents to Boston's Symphony Hall seem to epitomize young people's reactions: "You got a fancy grilled-cheese sandwich made with waffles," she recalls. She's had only positive experiences—in-

school artist visits, pop-up concerts, engagement programs—and she thinks that's a common reaction. "I remember all the kids being mellow," she says of most presentations. Those memories mix in with the recall of certain instruments, a vague recollection of "a string quartet," not many details about the repertory, and lots of fun listening.

Kids do everything with intensity. In bursts. So if kids bring the same excitement to an expensive visit to a classical concert as they do to, say, randomly spotting a pigeon on a sidewalk, one challenge lies in staking out what makes a concert special. Where should the focus be?

The music.

"There's nothing I can do explain it, to make them enjoy it, other than to let them hear the music," says Francesco Lecce-Chong, music director at the Eugene Symphony in Oregon and the Santa Rosa



Rebecca Young, the New York Philharmonic's associate principal viola, has been hosting the orchestra's Very Young People's Concerts for audiences age three through six for more than a decade. In photo, Young demonstrates "loud" and "soft" in music.

Symphony in California. Those orchestras have extensive programs for young people, and Lecce-Chong's personal enthusiasm has enhanced those presentations. "When I talk, I want to make them feel comfortable," Lecce-Chong says. "I don't necessarily want to teach them about the music. Give them a taste of a real concert. Don't tailor to them."

"If the music is great, that's the most



Eugene Symphony Music Director Francesco Lecce-Chong interacts with a young audience member at a recent family concert.



A 2019 Eugene Symphony Beethoven-themed family concert included a Musical Time Machine devised by the South Eugene Robotics Team, a program for high school students.

Music Director Jaap Van Zweden conducted the New York Philharmonic's December 2019 Young People's Concert at Geffen Hall.



Chris Lee

important part,” says José-Luis Novo, music director of the Annapolis Symphony Orchestra in Maryland. “If you talk, concentrate on a few aspects of the music. They’ll figure out everything else. Do short

nesota Orchestra, assistant conductor of the Alabama Symphony Orchestra, and music director of the Alabama Symphony Youth Orchestra. He has conducted concerts for young people during multi-

“I have to remind myself what type of music inspired me, and the players in the orchestra,” says conductor Roderick Cox, who will lead a New York Philharmonic Young People’s Concert in March. “Young people’s concerts with the some of the ‘Ride of the Valkyrie’ or Firebird—that’s riveting music, exciting to latch on to.”



pieces, explain it to them briefly, and children will react.”

Conductor Roderick Cox agrees. “Young people are attracted to excellent music, just like adults,” he says. Cox, an American who guest-conducts extensively from his base in Berlin, was previously associate conductor of the Min-

ple seasons in Milwaukee and Pittsburgh, and leads a New York Philharmonic Young People’s Concert this March. “Students gravitate toward storytelling,” he says. “At one concert for young people in Seattle, we played *The Firebird*. They loved it. They could hear the story present in the music.”

Multiple Models

There are almost as many approaches to presenting music to young people as there are orchestras. The New York Philharmonic made a big splash with its televised Young People’s Concerts led by the charismatic Leonard Bernstein in the 1960s, but the orchestra started offering children’s concerts back in 1924. The fact that Music Director Jaap van Zweden and an impressive roster of guest conductors continue to lead the YPCs demonstrates staunch commitment.

The North Carolina Symphony—with state funding that fuels a broad education mission—piles all its musicians into buses 40 times a year to crisscross North Carolina. “We think it’s the most extensive outreach of any orchestra,” says Jason Spencer, director of education, referring not only to the road trips, but dozens of main-stage performances in Raleigh’s Meymandi Hall plus online resources, residencies, and teacher workshops.

The Cleveland Orchestra’s expansive list of educational activities makes one wonder how the orchestra has time for regular subscribers: high-profile concerts at Severance



Instrument petting zoos are a frequent component of orchestras' young people's concerts. Above and right, musicians from the Annapolis Symphony Orchestra introduce youngsters to the double-bass, oboe, and trumpet at a recent education concert.



o'clock in the afternoon. We use licensed day-care workers for the kids and a really fine music teacher. Our musicians use the childcare, too. We can fit up to 45 kids." The little ones in the ROCORooters programs get their own repertory lesson, a brief trip to the adult concert, and then pizza. Parents and kids, grandparents and caregivers—everyone gets welcomed. Children benefit, and so do parents: "We save marriages, one concert at a time," Lawyer says.

Jumping Right In

Children love all kinds of music—for awhile. A two-hour concert is just too long for growing bodies that need to wiggle, squirm, and poke somebody. But giving them the flavor of the concert experience—a bit of the energy that adults experience—that's the trick. "Get them involved immediately," Lecce-Chong suggests. "I made them sing the 'Ode to Joy' till they got it right, before we played Beethoven. Get them invested right off the bat."

Hall are complemented by hundreds of in-school programs and vast online resources.

The Eugene Symphony gets inventive with its family concerts: last year an afternoon of Beethoven included a Musical Time Machine devised by a local robotics crew. Actor Bill Hulings portrayed the legendary composer, who was brought to the present day by the time machine, which was designed and programmed by members of the South Eugene Robotics Team, a program for high school students interested in building big bots. The interactive program showcased Beethoven's

life story and music while teaching children about the orchestra and instruments on stage.

Houston's ROCO ensemble creates a particularly family-and-parent-friendly vibe. Founded by Artistic Director Alecia Lawyer in 2005, the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra has offered childcare during select concerts since its inception. "When my church was renovating, I wanted to form an orchestra," Lawyer says of ROCO's beginnings. "I thought, 'The church has a kids night out. Why not have a concert for adults too?' We do the concerts at five

o'clock in the afternoon. We use licensed day-care workers for the kids and a really fine music teacher. Our musicians use the childcare, too. We can fit up to 45 kids." The little ones in the ROCORooters programs get their own repertory lesson, a brief trip to the adult concert, and then pizza. Parents and kids, grandparents and caregivers—everyone gets welcomed. Children benefit, and so do parents: "We save marriages, one concert at a time," Lawyer says.

"I do a thing that's partly education, but mostly to deal with distractions," says Michael Miller, who plays trumpet at the Cleveland Orchestra and is an active presenter of kids concerts. To get kids involved and show how some wind instruments work, Miller brings out a hose, "six or eight feet long, with a funnel to blow in. The kids hold it along the length, to feel the vibrations. I'll always pick the kids who are creating distractions, and all of a sudden they start paying attention."

Sticking to consistent repertory remains important. "I'm turned off by music that is pieced together," Lecce-Chong says, "just to make a show. I love jazz, I love non-classical genres. We do that, but I want them to be quality works on their own. Play great music, in short excerpts, but try to include as many full pieces as possible."

"We use the simplest concepts," says Rebecca Young, associate principal viola at the New York Philharmonic. Young began hosting the NY Phil's Very Young People's Concerts—intimate chamber-music events for audiences age three through six—more than a decade ago. "We explain dualities, like adagio/allegro. We focus on



North Carolina Symphony Music Director Grant Llewellyn and concert host Andy Pidcock at the orchestra's first sensory-friendly concert at Meymandi Concert Hall in September 2019.

Michael Zrlie



In Houston, Texas, music educator Keisha Twitchell gets children dancing during a recent River Oaks Chamber Orchestra ROCORooters event. ROCORooters combines childcare and music education, and is held in the same building where adults attend a full ROCO concert.

an instrument family. My overarching goal is to make the kids have fun. So much fun they want to come back.”

Talk about full circle: Young was introduced to music at the age of two when her parents took her to New York Philharmonic Young People’s Concerts led by Leonard Bernstein. Now, as host, Young not only talks about the music, she has tap-danced, played drums, ridden a scooter around the stage, and sung Gilbert & Sullivan. In 2019,

“If you talk, concentrate on a few aspects of the music,” says Annapolis Symphony Orchestra Music Director José-Luis Novo. “They’ll figure out everything else. Do short pieces, explain it to them briefly, and children will react.”



Michael Adams

Young received a Ford Musician Award for Excellence in Community Service from the League of American Orchestras for her work on the Philharmonic’s YPCs. The Ford Musician Awards celebrate professional orchestra musicians who provide exemplary service in their communities and make a significant impact through educa-

tion and community engagement. Now in its fourth year, the awards program is made possible through the generosity of Ford Motor Company Fund.

Young describes a linear approach for the littlest concertgoers: keep distractions down, keep the story moving with a tight focus. “We have the kids come in through different stations in the lobby, playing games with dance and music,” she says. “We warm them up, get them ready to

hear certain words. I feel like I have them along with me, as long as it’s focused.”

Young noticed that video accompaniment—which might seem like a no-brain winner for young audiences—actually distracts attention from the music. José-Luis Novo experienced the same thing when using video at the Annapolis Symphony

Orchestra: “We are taking the power and importance of the music away.”

Start and Don’t Stop

Breaking-news update: Musicians used to be kids. Getting little ones in the door (when they generally have no choice) is easy. Getting them to embrace music on their own—and maybe even to start playing instrument, and stick with it—is something else altogether. “Positive performance experiences are a must,” Cox says. “Any instrument studies have to be complemented with positive performance experiences, where you can imagine yourself onstage.”

“I want to let them know that playing an instrument is something they can do,” says Miller. “If I can do that, they can do that. I learned because my grandfather had a trumpet he let me monkey around with. So maybe I could do for them what that trumpet did for me. The notion is that you can gain some skill and express yourself, that you can feel good with something that’s not electric, and not exorbitantly expensive. If I can plant that feeling just once...”

Conductors from an earlier era would rarely address young audiences. No longer: Spreading enthusiasm about music starts



Michael Zirke

Meymandi Concert Hall was packed for the North Carolina Symphony's September 2019 sensory-friendly concert, designed for children and adults with autism and sensory sensitivities

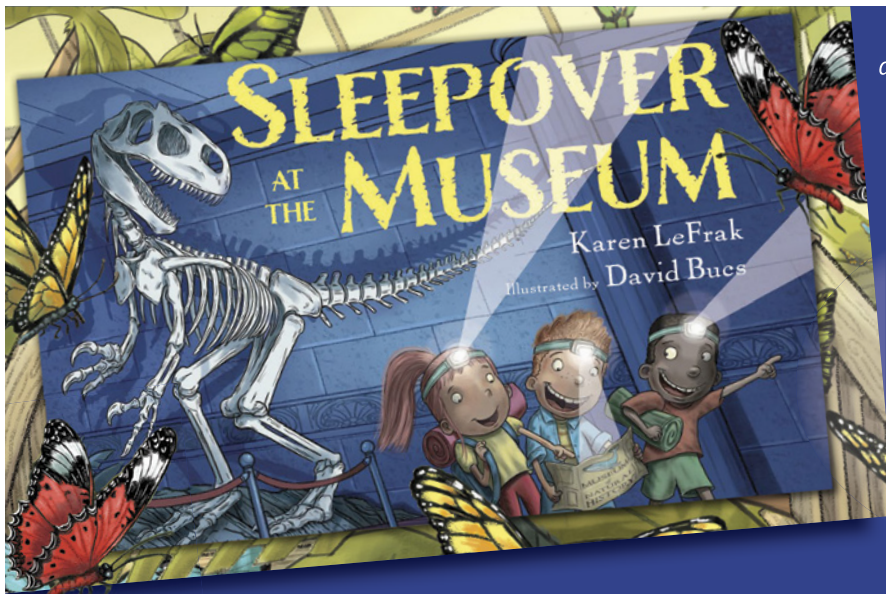
on the podium with the current generation. "I have to remind myself what type of music inspired me, and the players in the orchestra," Cox says. "When I dumb down the presentation, it doesn't have much musical appeal. Young people's concerts with some of the 'Ride of the Valkyrie' or

Firebird—that's riveting music, exciting to latch on to." Novo grew up in Spain, "listening to concerts on the TV, with my father singing ahead of the music. I thought that was amazing. That high level of passion, like my father had, that was enough to impress me."

Performing for young audiences isn't always easy, given that most of the performers have a day job already. "It is a lot of work, a lot of pressure," Young says. "But the minute I'm out there I feel like I'm home. For me, this makes a great balance with performing. I'm using a different part of my brain. I feel like a big clown; I'm expected to do something."

Gratitude for having things that others don't also plays a big part, especially for the Cleveland Orchestra's Miller. "Who knows what path I would have gone down," he says. "I grew up in Cleveland Heights, and maybe I feel more gratitude to the city." Here's why Miller is dedicated to doing young people's concerts: "When I go into neighborhoods where the kids have nothing, where there's lead paint everywhere—well, I remember that I'm here partly to help those neighborhoods." **S**

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"*Sleeper at the Museum* is charming, and the music accessible and imaginative. LeFrak's composition retained a sense of purity and simplicity with clever instrumentation and musical motives."
— South Florida Classical Review

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