

THE INTERSCHOOL ORCHESTRAS OF NEW YORK MY EXHILARATING 35-YEAR ADVENTURE*

By Annabelle F. Prager, Founder and Vice-President

Music-making has provided me with some of the most profoundly joyous moments of my life. I always assumed that my children, in fact all children, would be able to share in this great pleasure. So in 1971 when my 10-year old son expressed interest in playing the clarinet, I approached Irving Neidich, a well-known children's clarinet teacher, and asked if he would give him lessons. "I'm inclined to say 'No'", he told me. "What do you mean no?" I exclaimed as crestfallen as I was affronted. "Children are more apt to fall in love with their instruments, with music as well, if they can participate in an ensemble," he explained, "and your son doesn't go to one of the few schools in the city that has an orchestra. There is simply no place for him to play."

I marched right over to Colin Reed, Head of the Middle School at Collegiate where my son was in fifth grade. "Where's the orchestra?" I demanded.

"Why don't you start one?" came the answer.

I didn't know the first thing about starting a children's orchestra nor was I aware that Mr. Neidich's observation about the dearth of instrumental music in the schools was just the tip of the iceberg. In New York City, the so-called cultural center of the world, budget cuts and other priorities were rapidly eliminating music programs of all kinds from school curricula. Even the neighborhood music schools didn't offer instrumental ensembles. A Board of Education task force at the time cast doubt on the city's ability to produce either performers or audiences for the future.

I called a meeting of school music teachers at Collegiate and hit the jackpot. David Hume, headmaster of St. David's School, showed up. David knew the schools well and was a terrific organizer. Most of all he believed as I did that children should be offered first-rate opportunities to make music. So too did the small committee of school heads, parents and music lovers we assembled, which included Henry Bloch, an experienced conductor of young people, introduced to us by Irving Neidich, who had by then become our staunch ally.

Our committee was advised to form a not-for-profit corporation. We hit on the idea of enlisting support from schools in return for an orchestra for their students and musical services they were unable to supply themselves. We vowed that the orchestra would be open to any child regardless of his or her ability to pay our small fee. Talent from every cultural, economic and ethnic background should be nurtured. Our active scholarship program has more than fulfilled this promise.

In June 1972, a little orchestra made up of 32 children from 16 supporting member schools and 6 additional public and private schools gave its first concert at the Chapin School. The ISO Orchestra (now the ISO Symphony) has had many triumphs since that time. It has performed in the pit for the Dance Theater of Harlem, it has rehearsed under the baton of Kurt Masur and made the front page of the New York Times playing at Grand Central Station. But I do not believe there will ever be an event that will equal the excitement of that first concert. Twelfth graders and fourth graders played side by side. There were lots of violins and too many flutes. Nobody minded -- they were so thrilled to be making music.

So we set off on a most exhilarating adventure, learning on the job as we searched for new ways to deal with

*Written for the 35th anniversary program in 2008.

the crisis that was taking place in arts education. The orchestra was an immediate success, and we divided it into two ensembles so that the top players could progress more rapidly. Chamber groups were formed. Eventually beginner orchestras grew out of the realization that musical skills are best developed at an early age. By the mid-1980s membership in the top highly acclaimed ISO Orchestra had become an honor and a privilege; with some trepidation, we renounced the small tuition fee that represented a substantial part of our budget, making it into an all-scholarship ensemble. The Orchestra began to receive invitations that would be the envy of any professional group.

In the 70s and 80s when music education was irritatingly referred to as a frill, our mission was often brushed aside or belittled. A professional fund-raiser assured me that no proper foundation would give a gift to an organization of such little consequence. Thankfully there were enlightened funders to prove him wrong. A member of a prestigious musical organization told me coldly, "It's not our job," when, during one of my many attempts to form constructive partnerships, I begged them to take an interest in children's musical education.

Undeterred we made it "our job." our job to create a life-long devotion to music in as many children as we could reach, our job to develop talent waiting silently in the schools to be discovered. We took our young players into the schools so that others of their age could see our groups making music with skill and pleasure. ISO assemblies and concerts created excitement, and what pleased me especially was that it lit a fire under a great deal of new musical activity.

We were having difficulty finding the oboe, French horn, viola and string bass players required for a well-balanced orchestra. On the advice of a music educator well-known for the successful school orchestras she ran in Connecticut, we devised one of our most productive projects: new instrumental programs for our member schools. They were initiated through performances and instrument demonstrations for fourth and fifth graders by our children and staff, and followed by mini lessons so that the students could try wind, brass and string instruments themselves. ISO's popular Instrument Introduction Days, which every year launch dozens of children on musical careers, developed out of these first efforts. So did our scholarship incentives to tackle the more difficult instruments.

In 1979, when Jonathan Strasser came to ISO from the Manhattan School of Music and the High School of Performing Arts (now LaGuardia High School), increasing numbers of talented public school children began to flock to ISO, needing guidance as well as financial assistance and bringing a new dimension to our efforts. We became increasingly familiar with the schools they attended, the majority of which had no music teachers. ISO saw this as a wonderful opportunity to offer its substantial services to the public schools free of charge.

From that time on an equal number of assemblies and instrumental programs have been presented each year at both public and private schools. Audiences from under-served neighborhoods are among the most enthusiastic. Settlement houses and after-school programs also look forward to ISO's annual visits. Hours spent with district supervisors, teachers and school principles generate exciting ideas, often resulting in productive partnerships, in scholarships for talented children, and in assistance for some of the surviving school arts programs.

Our dream of starting more new instrumental programs for public schools took a giant step toward reality when our former Executive Director, Ann McKinney, came across a treasure trove of musical instruments, broken, dusty and forgotten in the basement of a Chinatown elementary school where we had given an assembly program. Calls to other schools turned up similar caches left over from days when bands and orchestras used to flourish. I told this story to a friend who was a trustee of a children's foundation that supplies equipment for not-for-profit organizations. He became wildly excited. "I'll supply the funds to

repair the instruments,” he declared, “if you find ways to help the schools use them.” He took special delight in the programs that were soon underway employing faculty who had lost their jobs due to budget cuts. At one beleaguered school, space was at such a premium that music classes were held in a stairwell.

By the 1990s I found I had repeated each June, “This has been such an astonishing year; we will never have another to equal it.” But we always did. For our “Youth Festival of French Music,” world-famous cellist Paul Tortelier waived his \$11,000 fee to fly here from Nice for a week of rehearsals and a concert with the ISO Symphony because he admired our program. Peter Schikele wrote a piece for us which employed young ensembles at three levels. We began to master the art of fundraising enabling us to expand our outreach and scholarship programs and afford a proper office. Until then we had relied upon the good nature of two successive executive directors who operated ISO from the back bedrooms of their apartments.

The tide of public opinion finally turned in favor of our goals when a series of *New York Times* articles sent out an alarm about the dismantling of arts programs in the schools. The *Times* also compared ISO favorably with other outreach programs, praising “the unique hands-on opportunities” we offered to children, which created unparalleled devotion to music -- exactly what had motivated me to start ISO in the first place!

I couldn't resist a secret smile of satisfaction when I heard about the prestigious musical organizations which were now providing performances and special classes for the schools. In fact, such a bewildering amount was going on that, with support from Itzhak Perlman, ISO organized two extremely productive music forums so that these groups could come together with their funders and the schools to exchange ideas and pinpoint problems.

Today, it would be difficult to find a youth music program that offers the wide variety of performance and educational opportunities that ISO does. Nor one that makes more creative use of its resources for the schools and the community. Just to mention a few examples are the event filled trips and musical exchanges inside the USA and abroad; the yearly coaching from members of the London Symphony Orchestra and the NY Philharmonic; the exploration of jazz and the musical theater; the uniquely successful win-win T.I.P. (Teacher Intern Program) which is uncovering promising talent at the Julia Richmon Complex. A new in-depth partnership program, *In Concert*, initiated by our new Executive Director, Nora Gibson, is already producing exciting results in the schools.

But most exhilarating of all are the wonderful children themselves. Whatever their backgrounds -- from the most talented winners of ISO prestigious concerto competitions to the eager little six year olds in the Morningside Orchestra, their enthusiasm, their dedication to excellence and their joy in the task at hand are testimony to what music can do for young people -- and young people for music.

If any one had told me back in 1972 that our little orchestra would become one of New York's most important musical resources for children, I would have said they were dreaming. But of one thing I am sure - for all those who care about ISO and its astonishing activities, the next 35 years will be just as exhilarating!