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A sound program for city children

Also, BSO spearhead OrchKids to offer musical training, social outlets

By Tim Smith

Sun music critic

May 21, 2008

When Marin Alsop began her tenure as music director of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra last year, she put a high priority on developing educational projects that could bring together the institution and the surrounding community, especially those parts not being reached by the orchestra.

Yesterday, Alsop announced the launch of OrchKids, an after-school music program spearheaded by the BSO, in conjunction with a partnership of city organizations, and pledged \$100,000 of her own money to support it.

Inspired by the success of the countrywide El Sistema program in Venezuela, which provides musical training and social outlets for several hundred thousand low-income children, OrchKids will begin as a pilot program with about 25 first-graders at Harriet Tubman Elementary in West Baltimore, starting in September.

Those inaugural students, currently in kindergarten, sported T-shirts with the OrchKids logo and slogan - "Planting Seeds for a Bright Future" - as they sat attentively through yesterday's news conference at the school.

"This will be a program for the whole child," Alsop said. "It will combine music and mentorship."

The first-graders will meet three days a week. They will be exposed to sounds, styles and other elements of music and, by the end of the school year, will choose an instrument to study during subsequent years. By the third year, the goal is for experienced OrchKids to help mentor first-graders who enter the program.

"If one, none or 100 of these kids goes on to become a musician, that's great," Alsop said. "But this is more about the experience. It's not about how good the kids sound. It's nonjudgmental. I think in America, we become obsessed with test results instead of the process. I want kids to enjoy the journey."

Partners in the BSO initiative include the city public school system, the Peabody Institute and the Baltimore School for the Arts, as well as two educational/community resource organizations: Arts Every



Day and the Family League of Baltimore City. The latter recommended Tubman Elementary for the pilot program, "based on its proximity to Meyerhoff, its commitment to music education and its supportive principal," said Eileen Andrews Jackson, the BSO's vice president of public relations and community affairs.

The school, which has an active music program, is in "an area classified as high in violent crime," said Tubman Principal Yvonne L. Cunion. "My vision for the school is for it to be a hub for the community. I want children to feel safe here, parents to feel safe here.

"When I got the call about this project, I did not hesitate," Cunion said. "It opens so many doors for the children. [Music] will give them another choice to make as they go out into the big, bad world."

OrchKids will cost about \$250,000 for the first year. Those costs have been fully funded, in large part by BSO donors Robert E. Meyerhoff and Rheda Becker, a longtime narrator for BSO educational concerts.

Alsop, who received a \$500,000 MacArthur Foundation Fellowship in 2005, is using the final \$100,000 installment of that award to create a 4-to-1 matching grant to complete the initial funding and to keep OrchKids growing in the future.

Alsop expects to visit the school periodically once the program starts.

"I'd like to come in and work with them in group things, give them a sense of what a conductor does," she said. "I'm pretty much up for anything. These kids are so cute."

The role of BSO musicians in the after-school program is still being worked out.

"We had a big part in shaping this, but we will probably not be on the front line," said Jane Marvine, head of the BSO players committee. "We felt it would be successful only if people who specialized in teaching young kids were involved. We can act as mentors and role models. And as the kids learn instruments, that will open up a whole other realm of interaction with BSO players."

Plans call for OrchKids participants to take field trips to the Meyerhoff to hear BSO rehearsals and concerts. For the rehearsals, Alsop envisions the children and possibly their parents sitting alongside the musicians.

OrchKids program manager Dan Trahey, a tuba player and music educator who has taught in Baltimore public schools and at Peabody Preparatory, will organize a part-time staff of music instructors for the program.

He recently traveled to Venezuela to learn more about El Sistema, founded in 1975 by Jose Antonio Abreu. More than 100 youth orchestras have been created under this system, which particularly reaches out to children in high-crime, low-income areas. Several U.S. orchestras have been studying ways of adopting the principles of El Sistema in this country.

"The kids there have no [after-school] programs," Trahey said. "They go into the orchestra because there is nothing else to do. I took eight- and nine-hour rides into the countryside, where I saw five kids in the dirt playing a lick from Tchaikovsky. Music is not dumbed-down there. And the cooperative learning approach means you see an 18-year-old in an orchestra sitting next to a 5-year-old who is watching and learning."

Although OrchKids is not aimed at creating a youth orchestra, the basic principles of El Sistema,

including the development of social bonds and responsibilities, will be applied.

"The kids will be going to baseball games, visiting the police stables, doing all sorts of things together," Becker said. "I know it sounds grandiose, but something like this can create real social change."

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