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A New Collaboration Announced By Two Local Orchestras



MUSICAL MERGER: Longtime Youth Orchestra of Central Jersey (YOCJ) Symphonic Orchestra Director John Enz leads the ensemble in a performance from 2017. Enz has retired after 35 years, and the YOCJ will now partner with the Princeton Symphony Orchestra. (Kapu Patel Photography)

By Anne Levin

Amid the often discouraging news from local arts organizations due to the ongoing pandemic, two well-known musical ensembles have revealed a development that is decidedly more upbeat. The Princeton Symphony Orchestra (PSO) and the Youth Orchestra of Central Jersey (YOCJ) have announced a partnership that expands the PSO's assistant conductor position to include leadership of the YOCJ's Symphonic Orchestra.

The retirement of the youth orchestra's longtime Symphonic Director John Enz, who has also been a cellist in the PSO, was the main impetus for the new arrangement. Now, under the direction of

PSO Assistant Conductor Nell Flanders, the young musicians will take part in workshops and sectional rehearsals with the professionals from the PSO. They will also get special access to PSO concerts, and have an opportunity to meet and greet guest artists who perform with the orchestra.

“John Enz was keen that something like this could come out of him hanging up the baton.” said PSO Executive Director Marc Uys. “Over the last couple of years, we have had a peripheral relationship with them that has been gradually increasing. They have helped us out at Communiversity. They are a group I’ve admired for a long time. They are very much aligned with what is important to us.”

The two organizations trace their origins to the same person. Portia Sonnenfeld founded the YOCJ as the String Preparatory Orchestra in 1978. Two years later, she started the Little Orchestra of Princeton, which evolved into the PSO. Sonnenfeld died in 1987.

Based at West Windsor-Plainsboro High School, the YOCJ has performed in venues including Richardson Auditorium, Rutgers University’s Nicholas Music Center, Mayo Hall and Kendall Hall at the College of New Jersey, and the New Jersey Performing Arts Center. The PSO, led by Rossen Milanov, is a fixture at Richardson Auditorium and presents orchestral, pops, and chamber music programs as well as educational programs in partnership with local schools.

“The Princeton Symphony Orchestra is a very high caliber, professional orchestra,” said Larissa Epps, the youth orchestra’s executive director. “For our musicians to have this kind of relationship with them, to have their professionals come in and coach our musicians, really helps them set their sights even higher. A number of them go on to professional careers, and a lot of them attribute their success to their experience here.”

With no sign of the pandemic abating, the two orchestras are planning to interact online and hope to hold some virtual events. “We’re truly hoping, as everybody is, that come next spring we might be able to do some in-person events together,” said Epps. “Right now, we just can’t know.”

During his 35 years with the YOCJ, Enz had a dual role as the orchestra’s artistic director and symphonic conductor. Those two jobs will be divided, with Flanders taking on the post of YOCJ symphonic conductor and the youth orchestra’s longtime assistant artistic director Philip Pugh becoming its new artistic director.

This close collaboration with young musicians is important to the PSO. “I really believe it is so important for all of us to focus on the youth,” said Uys. “Not just in our industry, but everywhere — there

is a responsibility to share with young people. It adds a lot to what we do at the PSO in terms of our commitment to the community.”

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