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By Camilla Cruikshank

STARS OF TOMORROW



Conductor Juan Ramirez walks quickly on stage for the Spring Spotlight Concert by the Buckhead Youth Orchestra (BYO). This concert features the winners of the 2004 BYO Concerto Competition.

The first soloist is Erin Kirby. She is a freshman at Norcross High School, associate principal viola player with BYO, and the winner of the Junior Division in the competition. Ramirez picks up his baton and beams proudly at Kirby, motioning for her to step to the front of the stage. The baton descends, and the Allegro from George Philipp Telemann's Concerto in G Major for viola and orchestra is underway.

"Mr. Ramirez is an amazing individual," says Logan Anderson, 16, the Concertmaster of BYO and a long-time violin student of Ramirez. "He is an incredible violinist and composer; he does all kinds of community outreach, and he is an extraordinary cook."

Ramirez plays in the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and conducts the BYO and the Atlanta Community Symphony Orchestra. His big community project this year is working to keep music programs in the DeKalb County elementary schools. Anderson says, "When I show up at his house for my lesson, there will be something cooking, I guarantee it." No one seems to know when Ramirez finds time to sleep.

In spite of his schedule, Ramirez is always ready for a new project. Lisa Ramirez Ellinger, Juan's daughter and the Personnel Manager for BYO, said her father called her one day three years ago and said, "There is a musical void in Atlanta. There are not enough musical organizations for young people, and I want to start one." He explained his idea for an advanced string orchestra

to his daughter, and they went immediately to seek the endorsement of Sam Massell, former Mayor of Atlanta and President of the Buckhead Coalition. Massell's only comment was, "I like the idea, but call it 'Buckhead'." So, the Buckhead Youth Orchestra was born. Massell now serves on the BYO Advisory Board and helps spread the word about the orchestra.

Ramirez perceived a musical "void" because the only place in Atlanta for young string musicians was the Atlanta Symphony Youth Orchestra. However, he felt that even talented young string players who go directly into a symphony orchestra never acquire all the necessary knowledge and skills for becoming truly proficient musicians. Strings are the most difficult instrument to play. For example, a person must be skilled just to play in tune, and tuning the strings is not only difficult but also different from any other instrument.

Beyond the technical aspects of learning to play the strings, Ramirez envisioned an orchestra that would give hopeful young musicians a place to train and learn through exposure to the vast, rich repertoire of composers such as Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven. "Works written especially for a string orchestra are vital for young children learning music," says Ramirez.

The first BYO auditions attracted 200 talented youngsters from Atlanta and the surrounding areas. There were no brochures, web sites, or applications. Word-of-mouth alone created a tremendous turnout. "That level of interest was amazing," adds Ellinger.

Auditions for the BYO are held each year in September and all current members are required to try out each year. The auditions consist of a concerto movement or solo piece from the standard repertoire, required excerpts, and scales. Most people consider the BYO auditions "nice" because they are conducted in a warm and supportive atmosphere. "The children must play their best in a five-minute window of time, so we try to make it like a family," Ellinger says.

With the orchestra in place, Ramirez needed community support. Like most arts organizations, BYO operates on a shoestring budget. However, they do have a huge mailing list, a large audience, and a very involved parents association. They also receive support from professional musicians and the community.

All BYO parents must belong to the Parents Association. Richard Kirby, president of the association, says that parents are willing to work hard because they feel their children are privileged to study with Ramirez. The parents are not merely chauffeurs. They attend regular meetings, sponsor fund raising events, sell advertising in the programs, set up and tear down the stage, sell tickets, and during the week take their children to individual private lessons. They bring food for a break during the six-hour rehearsal every Saturday, serve it, and clean up afterwards. Sounds just like home.

Ellinger is proud to add, "There is no paid staff. We do this because we love the arts and want to support kids in music. We all have day jobs, but at the end of the day, we have the Buckhead Youth Orchestra."

Professional musicians often come and work with the orchestra during Saturday rehearsals. In recent months music department faculty members from Georgia State, the University of Georgia, and the University of

Alabama have worked with BYO. Ramirez says he feels this type of mentoring is essential, adding, "The experience of interacting with professionals lifts them [young orchestra members] up above what they would get with people their own age."

Anderson agrees. "I find this helpful because it is interesting to hear different opinions about playing and playing styles," he says. "If you only pick up one new thing, it's worthwhile."

One large supporter in the community is Northwest Presbyterian Church and its pastor, the Rev. Randy Calvo Jr. The church provides practice space as well as a concert venue for BYO. Ellinger says, "We have a home here. You need a foundation to build on, and Rev. Calvo and the whole congregation have given us one."

Ramirez wants to give children an opportunity to perform, and he schedules a variety of concerts around Atlanta each year. The typical BYO season includes eight concerts and special performances for organizations like the Buckhead Business Association, the Starlight Children's Foundation, the Decorators' Show House, and the Consumers' Choice Awards. Individual members also have the chance to participate in the annual Golden Isles Music Festival on St. Simons Island. This summer, the BYO took a two-week European concert tour where they performed in Monaco, Paris, and Geneva.



In an era where so much news about young people is bad news, the BYO provides strong evidence that discipline, elegance, and musical skills are still worth achieving. Members of the BYO are multi-talented and intelligent. In addition to maintaining a rigorous music schedule, they are exceptional students and participate in athletics, drama clubs, or opera. They perform in other orchestras and are involved in church and community activities. When they leave BYO, they go on to universities to continue studying music.

Anderson is an example of a super achiever. He became interested in music at the age of three and has been playing the violin for eleven years. A typical weekday for him begins at 6 a.m. and ends at midnight. During this 18-hour day the Westminster School sophomore plays baseball, takes private violin lessons *and* does homework. He practices the violin from 1 ½ to 4 hours a day depending on his baseball schedule. In addition to BYO he plays with the Westminster orchestra.

Logan and Ramirez appear to be kindred spirits because they have the same level of energy and dedication to fine music. Thanks to BYO, talented and dedicated young people like Kirby and Anderson have more opportunities to perform and progress in the world of music.

With typical teenage enthusiasm, 14-year-old Kirby describes Ramirez. "He is so cute, and we love him so much," she says. When asked why BYO is important to her, she adds, "Mr. Ramirez is such a great teacher. He likes to get things done. He is very professional, but at the same time he lets us into his personal life." Ramirez is a cheerleader for the young musicians in his care. He treats them like they are his own children, and he achieves results with praise and encouragement.

Whether the young musicians in the BYO become "stars" on the performance stage or not, music will always be part of their lives. Today's youth orchestras will become tomorrow's symphony members and patrons of the arts. They might decide to teach, repair instruments, or manage a symphony or chorus. Whatever they choose, they will become the next generation of musicians

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