



## NJ Youth Symphony Celebrates 45 Years of Music Education

MADDIE ORTON (00:02):

Hi, I'm Maddie Orton for the Jersey Arts podcast. Involvement in New Jersey Youth Symphony, a program of Wharton Arts in Union County, is not just about honing musical technique, it's also about developing life skills. Many of the organization's alumni have gone on to careers performing with the likes of the New York Philharmonic, teaching the next generation of artists, or managing major musicians. But most have applied the leadership skills, collaborative spirit and work ethic developed at New Jersey Youth Symphony to other fields and areas of life.

On Sunday, May 5th, all of these alumni are invited back to listen to and perform with New Jersey Youth Symphony their 45th anniversary concert held at NJPAC, and founding Music Director and conductor George Marriner Maull will be back for the first time to guest conduct part of the concert.

I spoke with Maull and Wharton Arts Artistic Director and Principal Conductor Helen Cha-Pyo, about New Jersey Youth Symphony's history, arts education philosophy, and upcoming anniversary concert. Take a listen.

MADDIE ORTON

Helen George, thank you so much for joining me today. I really appreciate your time. Happy to be here.

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GEORGE MARRINER MAULL (01:11):

Happy to be here

HELEN CHA-PYO:

Thank you for having us

MADDIE ORTON (01:12):

45 years is quite the accomplishment. Congratulations. Let's start with George and a little bit about the beginning of New Jersey Youth Symphony. And for people who aren't familiar, what does the organization do? And what was the idea behind it because, you know, kids are getting the opportunity, hopefully in school as well. But this is an additional opportunity to really hone their craft.

GEORGE MARRINER MAULL (01:32):

In the summer of 1979, a group of parents from Union County—communities like Summit, Westfield, New Providence— went to the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, the state's premier professional orchestra in Newark, and said, 'We would like to start a youth symphony program for our kids. They are involved in their school orchestras, but we want to give them something more than what they can get there, and also have them be with other musicians who are very talented.' So they went to the New Jersey Symphohny and asked if they would help, and they went, 'Sure, we will do this, and we'll have our assistant conductor do the honors of being the first music conductor.' The only problem was, I hadn't been engaged yet to be the assistant conductor.

MADDIE ORTON: (02:19):

What do you mean?

GEORGE MARRINER MAULL (02:20):

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Well, they didn't have an assistant conductor at that moment. The previous one had retired from the orchestra. So I got a call from the music director of the New Jersey Symphony and he said, come over to Newark, I want to talk to you. And at that lunch he offered me the position of assistant conductor of the New Jersey Symphony, which I was very happy to take. And then he said in almost the same breath, 'you can conduct a youth orchestra, can't you?' And I said, 'I think so. Which one?' He said, 'it doesn't exist yet.'

MADDIE ORTON (02:49):

Oh, that's exciting. So how did you sort of get that first group of kids and what were those first years?

GEORGE MARRINER MAULL (02:56):

I thought this could be pretty tricky, truth be known, but the New Jersey Symphony put the power of its marketing department behind this effort. And so whereas I was afraid there might be two violins and four trombones who show up as an audition, the first audition about 95 young people playing all the orchestra instruments showed up. And we selected an initial orchestra of 65 of them to be the New Jersey Youth Symphony.

MADDIE ORTON (03:29):

Wow. And at the time, what did that experience offer students that they weren't getting in school?

GEORGE MARRINER MAULL (03:35):

Well, it offered the opportunity to be with other really talented students. I mean, you had to pass the audition to get into this orchestra. So all of the kids who showed up were in many cases, some of the best players in their own high school orchestras, which meant that we could do the regular symphonic repertoire with these people, which could not be done in their high schools. We could do symphonies and concertos and tone poems and what have you. So it was very exciting to have this group of young people be so talented and prepared for this experience. And we also included in their instruction theory classes so that they learned more about music theory and also classes in how to listen to classical music.

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MADDIE ORTON (04:21):

Oh, that's interesting. And I guess that's sort of a nuance that you're not necessarily getting in the classroom at school.

GEORGE MARRINER MAULL (04:26):

No. You most certainly do not necessarily learn how to listen to classical music in school. You may get some music theory, you may, but not how to listen to it from an aesthetic standpoint, how it will make you feel when you listen to this very carefully.

MADDIE ORTON (04:42):

When you're teaching students how to listen to classical music, what does that entail? What are you pointing out to them or telling them to listen for?

GEORGE MARRINER MAULL (04:50):

Well, there are two things that always happen at our presentations. The first is we try to create an aha around the difference between listening and hearing. When we listen to something, we are there completely present with our entire being. All our faculties are focused on the musical sounds. When we hear music, it's in the background. It's where music normally is in our life. It's everywhere. It's being electronically amplified in the supermarket, in the doctor's trading office, on the phone, on hold. It's everywhere. The only problem with that development technologically in our human society is that it has trained generations of people in the industrialized world not to listen to music. It's just there like sonic wallpaper accompanying every activity in their life. And that's okay. I'm not saying that's a bad thing, but when someone like Mozart writes a piece of music, he expects us to listen to sound from the first one all the way to the end. So anyway, to accomplish this, I often will tease the audiences. Basically, we ask them to identify, for instance, when the trombones play next. So we'll play some music for them, whether we say, okay, now raise your hands when the trombone play, and then we'll intentionally play a piece of music in which the trombones don't play at all.

MADDIE ORTON (06:24):

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Okay.

GEORGE MARRINER MAULL (06:24):

And of course, when I ask, 'I didn't see any hands go up.' People start complaining, 'well, I didn't hear the trombones.' And I said, 'that's right, because we intentionally didn't let you listen to them,' I said. And then I go into my little sermon about the difference between listening and hearing. Now, once you decide, and it has to be a conscious decision, once you decide to give your undivided attention to musical sounds, then there are all sorts of facets of this music that we can notice. So that was a particular issue for me. I felt that was important for them. We incorporated it right from the start.

MADDIE ORTON (06:58):

Helen, you're the artistic director of Wharton Arts. There are several different facets of Wharton Arts, including New Jersey Youth Symphony. Can you tell me about the different areas that the organization covers?

HELEN CHA-PYO: (07:09):

Sure. I can kind of piggyback where George left off. So in 2012, New Jersey Youth Symphony came under Wharton Music Center, and then in 2013, Patterson Music Project was founded. And then two years ago, New Jersey Youth Chorus came under the umbrella of Wharton Arts. And so now we have four programs. So total we have about 2000 students, and we have close to a hundred artistic staff that are anywhere from teaching artists to conductors, to private teachers, to coaches. And going back to the root of the New Jersey Youth Symphony, we still have many, many New Jersey Symphony professional musicians who coach our ensembles. So we have 15 ensembles now we have three string orchestras of young students, three symphony orchestras, and we have three flute ensembles. We have two percussion ensembles, three jazz ensembles, as well as a clarinet ensemble and young wind band. So concert winds we call them, as well as chamber ensembles. So it's a really robust seven day a week kind of operation here at Wharton Arts.

MADDIE ORTON (08:38):

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And after 45 years of all of these different ages and subsections, you must have so many alumni at this point, right?

HELEN CHA-PYO: (08:48):

I mean, we have actually reached out to 45 years of alumni, although the database isn't all that great, this was before the computer age, right? Sure. If you are out there listening, New Jersey Youth Symphony alumni, please come back to us the month of May because we have a chair and a music stand set out for you. Just bring your instrument and your eagerness and happy memories.

MADDIE ORTON (09:17):

I love that. That is so inclusive. So alumni who go to the concert can also play in the concert?

HELEN CHA-PYO: (09:21):

Yes. So let me tell you about this exciting 45th anniversary month. I know we are really focused on May 5th, where George is going to be there to conduct the grand finale piece with alumni as well as our current Youth Symphony students. But that's Sunday afternoon on May 5th at three o'clock at njpac. And there we're going to be featuring the three symphony orchestras. So we have Phil Ammonia, and then we have Youth orchestra, and then we have Youth Symphony all playing two pieces each. So one piece they're playing by themselves. And then the second work, we have invited various alumni to come and join that particular orchestra. And then we also have jazz orchestra and jazz big band program has been instituted up my coming around five years ago. And we are fastly growing and we have a really wonderful jazz orchestra. And this year we honored George at our gala giving him the education award because he's still out there educating the public how to listen to classical music and really be engaged. And he's coming back to conduct our orchestra, but also we had a lifetime achievement authority, Rufus Reed, jazz bassist, who's going to be performing, he's two compositions with our NJYS jazz orchestra

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In terms of all these alumni. So you'll have alumni come back to the concert hopefully and play along. I assume you've had a lot of alumni who have gone on to illustrious careers in this area, but maybe some alumni who take what they've learned and apply it to something else entirely. Right.

GEORGE MARRINER MAULL (11:04):

I think that most of the kids do not go into music. It's a much smaller percentage of our students who actually decide to become professional musicians. And that's understandable because it's a very challenging thing to do. But I think all of them take into their life from then on, the discipline, the camaraderie, the knowing how important it's for us all to be united when we're performing. They take that into their lives.

MADDIE ORTON (11:29):

And I assume also time management, leadership skills. I know music is very correlated with math as well. So I assume that really no matter what career these kids go into, their experience in the orchestra will help them.

HELEN CHA-PYO (11:44):

We have about anywhere between 5% to 6% every year who might go into a conservatory or school of music, out of youth orchestra experience. And that's probably about the reasonable kind of percentage all across throughout the country here. And it is really, music education doesn't always produce the best players, and that's not really the outcome that we're really looking for. Its outcome is eventually we produce excellent people, people who are aware, people with some empathy, more empathy than maybe the children who have never played in an ensemble. When you play in an orchestra, I always say it's kind of like a little laboratory for life. All of the life skills that you need to be a good citizen and good neighbor and good person. You can learn in an orchestra, band, chorus, you name it. Any large ensemble, you are an important part of the big picture.

HELEN CHA-PYO (12:53):

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The picture is not complete without you, even if you are the 20th or the 40th violin in that orchestra. So it's never the same. And also, we have to listen to each other more than just our own sound. We have to blend, we have to be in tune. We have to know what the tuba is doing, what note that note is so that when I play my note that it is in sync with it harmoniously in tune with the foundation of the chord. I mean, there's just numerous things. And also I think the leadership, people say that. And then when you really dissect it, how is it that you learn leadership as an orchestral player? For the string sections, obviously there's an obvious leader. There's a concert master in the front, and then there might be somebody needs to sit in the back of the section.

HELEN CHA-PYO (13:48):

Now who's really the leader? I say both. Leadership can be from the back, leadership can be from the middle, leadership can be in the front. So whatever seems to be the most obvious leader alone will not make a good violin section. If that leader sounds the loudest and always kind of playing a little bit early, well, that's a terrible leader should really be working for the bigger picture and togetherness and the unity of the sound and doing things together because we agreed on that. So I say to all of the string players, you lead from wherever you are. If you are all taking on that responsibility of I need to really look around, feel the back, look to the front, be aware. And I think awareness is a huge thing. Some people in this society, self-awareness isn't quite there, and it's hard to do that.

HELEN CHA-PYO (14:48):

If you are an orchestral player, you are fully aware of what your part is and how important it is and what role it plays at a given moment. So you name it, you name it. You can really dissect everything that we do in an orchestra to life. And the students, by the time they get to the top level of NJYS, they have kind of unlocked something very special, meaning there's no shortcut. They work their butts off to be where they are, which means that they work as hard in other aspects of their lives as well. So they know work ethic. And there's either you know how to play this concerto or you don't. There's nothing in between and the world is there to listen to it. So honesty is number one. At the same time, confidence and having fun and being empathetic to other people. I think those three things make a great performance. And once you experience what you can do as part of a larger entity, and you are doing something that's larger than your own self, there's something that you cannot do. It is teaching you that we are so interconnected in this life.

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MADDIE ORTON (16:09):

Thank you so much to my guests, George Mariner Mall and Helen Chapo, New Jersey Youth Symphony's 45th anniversary concert is on Sunday, May 5th at NJPAC. For more information, visit [njpac.org](http://njpac.org) or [whartonarts.org](http://whartonarts.org). If you liked this episode, be sure to give us a review, subscribe and tell your friends a transcript of this podcast as well as links to related content and more about the arts in New Jersey can be found on [JerseyArts.com](http://JerseyArts.com). The Jersey Arts Podcast is presented by ArtPride, New Jersey, advancing state of creativity since 1986. The show is co-founded by and currently supported by funds from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts with additional support from the National Endowment for the Arts. This episode was hosted, produced, and edited by yours Truly, Maddie Orton, executive producers are Jim Atkinson and Isaac Serna-Diez. Special thanks to the team at New Jersey Youth Symphony. I'm Maddie Orton for the Jersey Arts Podcast. Thanks for listening.

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