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Giving Back to the Community through Music

Some musicians make music because it's what they love to do, others because it can make them lots of money, but some people use the music they make to better the community they live in. Jay Fishman of Local 30-73 (St. Paul- Minneapolis, MN) falls into the latter category.

Fishman started playing the violin when he was five years old. There was no orchestra at the high school he attended, so his mother, who was a professional musician, taught him to play the flute. After high school, he got his Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Arts degrees from the University of Minnesota.

During his senior year at the University of Minnesota, Fishman conducted his first orchestra. From there he moved on to Indiana University School of Music, where he completed a Masters of Music in orchestral conducting.

Fishman completed his education by studying with some of the best chamber orchestras in London. While there, he studied with Sir Neville Marriner, conductor of the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields Orchestra. Fishman is thankful for all the lessons and support he received from great teachers throughout his education.

Shortly after returning to the states Fishman founded the Minneapolis Chamber Symphony. After 11 years with the Minneapolis Chamber Symphony, he stepped away and started the Minnesota Sinfonia, which is where he has stayed ever since.

From its inception in 1989 he started some incredible programs with the Minnesota Sinfonia. The program, Music in the Schools, was started in Sinfonia's first year. It takes Fishman and his orchestra to inner city schools and teaches kids about history, math, and a wide array of other topics through music.

One performance entitled The Magical Mysteries of Math and Music shows the importance of mathematical relationships to music, and how the concepts of adding, subtracting, multiplication, and division are crucial to a successful music performance, Fishman explains. The performance brought the symphonies of Haydn, Tchaikovsky, Mozart, and other famous conductors to inner city schoolchildren.

Helping people is something that Fishman truly loves to do. Through Music in the Schools he gets to help kids that are sometimes in bad situations. "I get thousands and thousands of letters each year, and I read them all," he says.

He once received a letter from a child that said, "Thank you for coming to my school. This is the first thing I've ever enjoyed." A young mother of two daughters also wrote Fishman to express her gratitude, "Thank you Mr. Fishman. If you didn't do what you do, I wouldn't have anywhere to take my kids." When people express their appreciation to him, he says it's "incredibly gratifying."

Fishman also started a program to give free admission to all of the Sinfonia's concerts, encouraging parents to bring their children to all of them. Children aren't normally fans of symphony orchestras, but Fishman knows how powerful great orchestras can be. He likes his performances to be very relaxed, and he enjoys giving his music to everyone.



Jay Fishman of Local 30-73 (St. Paul-Minneapolis, MN) uses his position as conductor and founder of Minnesota Sinfonia as a launching pad for several community outreach programs, including Music in the Schools, bringing his orchestra and classical music to inner city schools.

Fishman has been a member of the Federation for 40 years. "The AFM has been incredibly supportive," he says, especially when it has come to programs like Music in the Schools. Fishman also praises the pension plan that the AFM offers, saying, "It's one of the most important things the AFM has done."

He would, however, like to see the Federation do more to educate kids about music. "Schools used to provide music education, but now they've dropped the ball. The AFM should fill the void left by schools," he says.

In his 30th year of conducting, Fishman still says that the future looks bright. "My health is good, my interest is still very high, and I expect to continue building this," he says. He hopes to do more concerts and to make the Minnesota Sinfonia a permanent fixture in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area.

"I'd like to see something like this happen in other cities, especially with Music In the Schools," he says. "I would be very interested in talking to other orchestras about how to start these programs in their cities."

Fishman's work truly transcends conducting. Any conductor can lead an orchestra, but Fishman's work doesn't stop there. He uses his musical abilities to better the communities in and around Minneapolis and St. Paul.