

MUSIC

30th anniversary is just a start for Minnesota Sinfonia director: 'I'm going to do this forever'

For three decades, Jay Fishman has tried to take his Minnesota Sinfonia to places where classical music is seldom heard.

By Terry Blain Special to the Star Tribune | OCTOBER 22, 2019 — 11:57AM

Staying in the same job for 30 years was once fairly common. Nowadays that seems almost ridiculously out of kilter in our fast-paced, digitally fueled world.

Jay Fishman, though, is happy to be an old-fashioned sort of fellow. Next weekend he leads the [Minnesota Sinfonia](https://www.mnsinfonia.org/) (<https://www.mnsinfonia.org/>), the orchestra he founded, in the [opening concerts of its 30th anniversary season](https://www.mnsinfonia.org/2019-20-winter-concert-season) (<https://www.mnsinfonia.org/2019-20-winter-concert-season>).

“I could have retired years ago,” he said with a laugh. “But that’s never going to happen. I’m going to do this forever.”

His roots in Minnesota music-making go back well beyond the founding of the Sinfonia in 1989.

“I started the old Minneapolis Chamber Symphony 41 years ago, and we had that orchestra for 11 years,” he says. Differences with its board of directors, however, led Fishman to quit the orchestra and start a new one of his own.

“My feeling was the symphony should remain a community-based orchestra, and we should not try to do things the Minnesota Orchestra and St. Paul Chamber Orchestra were doing.”

Instead, he put educational activities at the heart of his Minnesota Sinfonia from the outset, taking classical music to places it had difficulty reaching. “Our mission statement put a particular emphasis on people with limited incomes, inner-city youth, seniors and families,” he said.

To this day the Sinfonia offers free entry to all its concerts, one of few professional orchestras in the United States to do so.

Last year alone its outreach programs reached 12,000 inner-city students at elementary schools in Minnesota. An estimated 150,000 children have sampled classical music through the Sinfonia in its 30-year existence.

Where does Fishman’s drive to connect with the younger generation come from, and why does he gravitate toward these communities?

“It came from my upbringing,” he says. “My father played oboe in the old Minneapolis Symphony [now the Minnesota Orchestra] and my mother was a flutist, but we were not wealthy. I remember my father driving a laundry truck to make ends meet.”

Growing up in an economically straitened community of Jewish, African-American and Catholic families in the Near North Side of Minneapolis was “somewhat volatile,” Fishman remembers.



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Minnesota Sinfonia
Jay Fishman's Minnesota Sinfonia, which launches its 30th anniversary season Friday, aims to serve inner-city youth and people with

But it also had benefits. “It was an amazing community, and I had an education that was absolutely second to none at North High School,” he said. “I never forgot that, and I wanted to put together a community service organization with the highest artistic qualities we could muster to play for people who didn’t have access or money.”

In establishing the Minnesota Sinfonia, he drew upon a very different type of chamber orchestra for inspiration — the [Academy of St. Martin in the Fields](https://www.asmf.org/) (<https://www.asmf.org/>) in London, led by [Neville Marriner](http://www.startribune.com/sir-neville-marriner-music-director-of-minnesota-orchestra-1979-86-dies-at-92/395566691/) (<http://www.startribune.com/sir-neville-marriner-music-director-of-minnesota-orchestra-1979-86-dies-at-92/395566691/>), the internationally renowned conductor who was the Minnesota Orchestra’s music director from 1979 to 1986.

After earning a master’s degree in conducting from Indiana University in 1974, Fishman spent several years shadowing Marriner in London as he gave concerts and made numerous recordings with the academy.

It was, Fishman says, an immensely influential relationship.

“I would go to recording sessions and compare what I would do to what Marriner did. He said he would help me not make the same mistakes that he did when he was starting out.”

Marriner’s meticulously businesslike approach to music has continued to influence Fishman across the years he has led the Minnesota Sinfonia.

But the [Music in the Schools program](https://www.mnsinfonia.org/education/music-in-the-schools) (<https://www.mnsinfonia.org/education/music-in-the-schools>) that gradually became central to the Sinfonia’s activities is something Fishman initiated himself.

It involves much more than simply playing a classical music concert to students, then going home again, he says.

“What we do is take state academic standards in various subjects — science, math, literature, history — and find music which illuminates the academic subject. For instance, we use [Haydn’s ‘Surprise’ Symphony](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wEf4FRw_9WA) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wEf4FRw_9WA) to link with certain math concepts, or [Copland’s ‘Lincoln Portrait’](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lu-AKF4PEeQ) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lu-AKF4PEeQ>) for American history. The kids are enthralled by it.”

Crucial to Fishman’s approach is that students sit close to the players, so the viscerally thrilling sounds of a classical orchestra can be fully appreciated.

“We play in the gymnasium, never in auditoriums, and the farthest students are just 20, 25 feet away from us,” he says. “Our 26 players can make a lot of noise, and we just blow the kids out of the water.”

As the Sinfonia enters its fourth decade, Fishman sees a stronger-than-ever need for the educational services it offers.

“Music education in most of the schools we go to is limited, at best; most don’t have a full-time music teacher,” he says. “But it’s nothing short of extraordinary how children react when classical music is presented to them live, in their own school environment.”

The Sinfonia also plays regular public concerts, and it runs annual competitions for Minnesota-based composers and young musicians. The concerts Friday and Sunday will include the world premiere of a piece by [Minnesota native Kirsten Broberg](http://www.kirstenbroberg.com/) (<http://www.kirstenbroberg.com/>), commissioned through the [Sinfonia’s New Works program](https://www.mnsinfonia.org/competitions/new-works-competition) (<https://www.mnsinfonia.org/competitions/new-works-competition>).

Minnesota Sinfonia

What: Works by Bach, Elgar, Mozart’s Violin Concerto No. 5 (featuring [Grace Park](https://www.graceparkviolin.com/) (<https://www.graceparkviolin.com/>)) and the world premiere of [Kirsten Broberg](http://www.kirstenbroberg.com/) (<http://www.kirstenbroberg.com/>)’s “Flourish.”

When: 7 p.m. Fri., Founders Hall, Metropolitan State University, 387 Maria Av., St. Paul; 2 p.m. Sun., Basilica of St. Mary, 1600 Hennepin Av. S., Mpls.

Admission: Free.

Info: 612-871-1701 or [mnsinfonia.org](https://www.mnsinfonia.org/2019-20-winter-concert-season) (<https://www.mnsinfonia.org/2019-20-winter-concert-season>).

Taken together, it's a formidable workload, but one that Fishman embraces with an undiminished relish.

"I'm proud we offer everything free to the public, and dedicate over half of our performances and nearly 30 percent of our budget to children and their education," he says. "I feel pretty certain we're the only orchestra in the country which does all that."

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