


April-May-June 2024
VOLUME 42, NUMBER 2

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a publication of the
Twin Cities Musicians Union

Local 30-73 of the American Federation of Musicians of the United States and Canada

Jay Fishman reflects on an impactful career and the bittersweet finale of MN Sinfonia

About to complete his 50th year of professional conducting (47 of which have been in the Twin Cities, and 35 of those being the Artistic Director and conductor of the Minnesota Sinfonia), Jay Fishman recently announced his plans to retire in the fall of 2024.

His path to music and conducting was unusual to be sure. Entering the University of Minnesota in 1965, he intended to study medicine and become a doctor. However, when friends not so subtly suggested prescribing medicine “might not be a good idea” he decided to re-evaluate his plans and began studying music composition with the University’s Paul Fetler, and orchestration with Dominik Argento. In his senior year, with the aid of an undergraduate teaching assistantship, Jay got his first taste of conducting, leading the University’s chamber orchestra. He was hooked!

From the U of M, Jay went to the prestigious Indiana University School of Music to study conducting. From IU, he and his new wife Joyce (they actually met in a practice room!) traveled to Louisville, where Joyce played with the Louisville Orchestra and Jay resurrected the Louisville Chamber Orchestra. The LCO had shut down a couple of years prior to the Fishman’s arrival and, to make it work, Jay had to undertake the gigantic tasks of building both the administrative and artistic sides. It was in Louisville that he developed his administrative and fundraising chops that were to become so important a few years later when he first founded the old Minneapolis Chamber Symphony, and later the Minnesota Sinfonia.

After two years in Louisville, Jay and Joyce traveled to London, England where he studied privately with Sir Neville Marriner, the founder and conductor of the famed Academy of St. Martin in the Fields Chamber Orchestra. While in London, Jay also did some free-lance conducting, including a broadcast recording with the BBC.

Returning to the States in 1978, the Fishmans settled in Minneapolis. Like all young and aspiring conductors, Jay



sent out tons of resumes, and waited (im)patiently for that all-important invitation to guest conduct. But unlike other conductors, he also contacted area musicians and friends (he was born and raised in Minneapolis), wanting to start his own chamber orchestra. Jay had a dream of creating a great chamber orchestra that would offer true community services to everyone, regardless of age, education, ethnicity, and financial means. And this is how it all began.

Jay founded and then for eleven years conducted and oversaw the Minneapolis Chamber Symphony. The Twin Cities Musicians’ Union was particularly helpful, regularly providing up to 15 trust fund gigs every year and allowed for “bending” the bylaws (with musicians’ approval of course), which in turn encouraged the Chamber Symphony

to develop and grow. At first, the MCS was a summer orchestra, created to fill some of the gaps not met by the St Paul Chamber and Minnesota Orchestras. As the orchestra grew in proficiency and stature, it expanded to include a limited winter season. Jay recalls some especially gratifying accomplishments — many awards and accolades, inquiries from musicians all over the world to come and play in the orchestra, and funding from many of the region’s major foundations. For a part-time, free-lance, professional, union orchestra, those were some heady times.

In 1989, the MCS board of directors wanted to change the focus of the orchestra and move away from its original intent of providing programs to area residents who were not served by the area’s other major orchestras. Instead, they wanted it to become more like the SPCO and MO and serve a wealthier population. What developed was a messy and public split between Jay and the Board, which eventually led Jay and 17 members of the “old” 26-member Chamber Symphony to start the Sinfonia.

With the help of a new board of directors, including some of the Chamber Symphony’s original board mem-

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bers, and the leadership of the new board chair David Zimmerman, the Sinfonia was off and running. Abiding by its newly created mission statement to “serve the musical and educational needs of Minnesotans, with primary emphasis given to families with young children, inner-city youth, seniors, and those with limited incomes,” the Sinfonia created four core principles to guide the new organization:

- ALL programs offered FREE of admission charges
- Performances are in neighborhood locations best suited to serve its target audiences
- Everyone is welcome, including children, to every concert
- Music in the Schools will dedicate nearly one third of its artistic budget, and over half of its performances, to children and their education.

How the Sinfonia grew and succeeded

The plan was to retain the Chamber Symphony’s excellent artistic standards, and immediately add an educational component — Music in the Schools (MIS). From the very beginning, MIS was unique. Unlike other orchestras that require students to be bused to huge venues such as Orchestra Hall or the Ordway, Sinfonia musicians would do the traveling and go to inner-city public elementary schools. Program content would be based on academic standards and use live Sinfonia performances of great classical music to help teachers encourage and inspire their students in their academic journeys.

Music in the Schools was to be a two-to-three-month program of preparation and study, culminating with each school having its own “Sinfonia Day.” On this special day, Sinfonia musicians would first visit classrooms, after which everyone would gather in the school’s gymnasium for concert performances of the music students had been studying in class. As part of the Sinfonia concerts, school choirs and orchestras would perform with the Sinfonia.

Involving teachers was especially



important. With help from many educators and librarians, Jay created curriculum guides for the programs. He also made listening tapes (later CDs) for students to hear the music Sinfonia would play, and over the past thirty-five years he created more than eighty orchestral arrangements and original compositions to support MIS musical content. To encourage students’ classroom participation, academic-related projects such as building a water filtration system (for Water — Our Most Precious Resource) or creating little plays that were to be accompanied by Sinfonia (for Music Tells a Story) were added to the mix.

For students to see (most for the first time) live performances and hear great works such as Tchaikovsky’s *Romeo and Juliet*, Beethoven’s *Storm Scene* from his *Sixth Symphony*, and Duka’s *Sorcerer’s Apprentice* was truly amazing. After each piece was played, Jay would ask how many liked the music, and nearly every hand enthusiastically shot up in the air. MIS grew in popularity and stature to the point where it is now considered to be one of the most important and innovative music programs to be offered to schools anywhere! Pre-pandemic, Sinfonia annually worked with 18-22 schools and

9,000-10,000 students, and at no cost to the students or the schools. Sinfonia raised the money and offered MIS to the schools as part of its commitment to the children in our community. Music in the Schools now includes seven complete programs.

Music in the Schools has been a tremendously rewarding program and experience not only for the students, but also for Sinfonia musicians and for Jay. Over the years, Sinfonia has received literally thousands of thank-you letters and comments from students, teachers, and parents. Some of Jay’s favorites include the following: A third grader wrote: “Thank you for coming to my school. This is the first thing I ever enjoyed.” After Jay read the letter, he took it to the principal, and after reading it, she said, “I know the student and I know the family, and it is probably true.”

In a K-8 middle school, at the conclusion of *The Magical Mysteries of Math and Music*, an eighth grader approached Jay and told him that he was a drummer. He then continued with, “but I never realized the connection between math and music, and [emphatically added] now, I am going to study my math!”

For Jay, one more story sums up the

importance and effects of Music in the Schools on students:

A couple of years ago, two days before the Sinfonia visit, a shooting occurred in the neighborhood surrounding the school. One of the teachers warned Jay that many of the students knew the siblings of the victim, and discipline and behavior might be difficult. The program for that year was Music from Around the World, and included the students singing Beethoven's Ode to Joy. As Jay described, "Throughout the concert, the students were quiet and respectful, But when the 40+ member choir lined up on the risers, all dressed in choir robes, and began to sing, the gym turned into a magical concert hall. The kids sang with such passion and expression, that I literally had tears covering my face. It was one of the most amazing and exhilarating experiences I have ever had."

When Jay founded the Sinfonia, he wanted it to serve people who had limited or even no experience with live performances of classical music and who often did not have the financial means to buy expensive tickets. And, perhaps most importantly, Jay wanted to offer concerts where parents could feel comfortable bringing their children. The idea of playing in neighborhood (not downtown) locations with free admission to concerts, and advertising "bring the kids" on all publicity, became a winning strategy. Anonymous responses on concert surveys confirmed Jay's vision. At some venues, up to 35% of respondents had household income under \$35,000, and aside from Sinfonia concerts they rarely attended other professional orchestra concerts. The number of children at some venues was as high as 20% of the entire audience!

The orchestra already had a strong artistic reputation from its past association with the Chamber Symphony, and as time progressed, that reputation grew. Through friends and "being in the business for years," Jay developed contacts with many top-quality soloists who came to play with the Sinfonia. Not only would they solo many times, but also encouraged their friends to do the same. Often on grant questions or when Sinfonia musicians were asked where and how the orchestra attracted so many great soloists, the typical reply was, "Jay just invites his friends."

With its two primary programs, the Winter and Summer Concert Series, and its Music in the Schools' growing reputation, audience numbers and the number of schools and students reached kept growing, as did the orchestra's financial support. Adding programs for Minnesota's talented young musicians were the next logical step. The Sinfonia's Young Artist Com-



petition encouraged high school age students to compete to earn solo performances and cash prizes; a few years later the Youth Outreach Week was established where students could spend a week rehearsing and performing major orchestral works with Sinfonia. They too proved to be very popular and successful.

Two more programs were eventually added to the Sinfonia's expanding outreach. With major support from the Minnesota State Arts Board and the Arts and Heritage Fund, Sinfonia was able to tour its concert performances and MIS to several smaller rural Minnesota communities that rarely or never received attention from the other major professional orchestras. With support from the McKnight Foundation, through its "Call for Scores from Minnesota-based Composers," the Sinfonia was able to commission and premiere over fifty-five new works by Minnesota composers.

When finances allowed, Sinfonia undertook other smaller projects such as the North Side and Fridley Music and Arts Festivals, and performances at two of Taste Minnesota's grand finale concerts on the Capital steps.

Conclusion

After fifty years of professional conducting, one might conclude that Jay had had enough and wanted to retire. True, fifty years and over 1,600 perfor-

mances coupled with all the administrative responsibilities (including huge amounts of fundraising and grant writing), and arranging and composing 350 works for Sinfonia concerts and programs, were demanding, often well beyond the pale. But Jay has never lost his love of making music, performing for kids in the public schools, and working with his friends and colleagues.

The primary reason Jay decided to retire and for the Sinfonia to cease operations is because of disappearing financial support from the philanthropic community. The arts, which for so many years provided the community some of its proudest achievements, are no longer held in high esteem. Instead of growing and providing education and amazing experiences for young and old alike, orchestras, dance and theater companies, and performance venues are now wavering between cutting performances or closing the doors completely. Some like Sinfonia are ceasing operations, while others strip away educational and performance services, and are heading down a slow spiral of steady decline.

This has become a systemic community-wide problem, and Jay determined that there are no immediate, or even mid-term solutions in sight. He feels that a major shift in community leaders' values and priorities must take place, and unfortunately, he sees no indications that this will happen anytime soon.

Retiring and ceasing the Sinfonia's operations under these circumstances is bittersweet. Jay is very proud of the orchestra's accomplishments, its exceptional artistry, its work with over 250,000 inner-city students, and the thousands of audience members who have enjoyed performances for all these many years. And he is especially grateful for the past financial support the orchestra received from so many sources, which allowed him to fulfill his dreams. His hope is that circumstances will change, and the arts will again take their rightful place as an important and valued resource for the tens of thousands of students and community members who have in the past (and will in the future) enjoy, participate, and learn in Minnesota's vast and vital cultural scene.