

FORWARD MOMENTUM

THE IN UNISON PROGRAM PROVIDES SCHOLARSHIPS TO
AFRICAN-AMERICAN YOUTH TO BE THE NEXT
GENERATION OF MUSICIANS, ADMINISTRATORS, AND EDUCATORS

BY DANIEL DURCHHOLZ

Chad Pleasant, St. Louis Symphony Youth Orchestra



For more than two decades, the St. Louis Symphony's IN UNISON[®] program has been serving as an outreach to the African-American community—providing area churches with music-related resources, including Symphony musicians who perform at church services and other special events. IN UNISON[®] also increases access to Powell Hall for member churches via discounted concerts, music camps, and more. Since 1994, the 120-voice In Unison Chorus has become an integral part of the St. Louis Symphony family, performing A Gospel Christmas and



Brian Owens, mentor to In Unison scholars and performing artist

Black History Month concerts each year before packed houses at Powell. Forty-one churches are currently active in the In Unison program.

In 2000, the chorus created a scholarship fund for African-American students from the St. Louis area who are planning to study music at an accredited, undergraduate, four-year music program. Last year, that program grew to include a scholarship in the area of arts administration.

“We always talk about how we can bridge the gap of diversity in the orchestral world,” says Brian Owens, who serves as the In Unison Program Manager for the St. Louis Symphony. “Programs like ours are a great start to doing that.”

Owens—a professional musician in his own right, whose latest album of soul classics, called *Help the People*, is set for an early 2014 release—mentors the scholarship recipients and helps walk them through the college experience. “Even if they don’t end up playing professionally,” he says, “it’s about helping them carve out that niche and that vision for what it is they want to do—or not do—in the artistic world.”

Owens knows how significant a launching pad an In Unison scholarship

Forward Momentum

can be. Both he and his wife Amanda attended the University of Missouri-St. Louis as In Unison scholars. In his current position, he's able to impart that experience to his current charges.

"I'm like the big brother," he says. "I want to be the big brother who, like, if you need something, call me. I want to share information that I have with you about things I've learned in the industry, about things I've learned in this world of the orchestra, and expose [the current crop of In Unison scholars] to people who can help them in ways that I can't."

Recently, the program has broken through to a new level, with several of its scholars auditioning for, and being accepted into the St. Louis Symphony Youth Orchestra. Bassoonist Joseph Hendricks made the orchestra in 2012 and is a member again this year. He was followed in 2013 by percussionist Matthew Clark and violinist Chad Pleasant. All three are students at UM-St. Louis.

"The way I do things, I set a goal and try to reach that goal," says Clark, who played violin and percussion at Central Visual Performing Arts High School and also participated in the independent percussion ensemble Show Me Sound. "Once Brian told us about the Youth Orchestra, I spent my entire summer immersing myself in the music and what I had to do to get into the orchestra."

Hendricks and Pleasant are similarly driven. Before he began taking bassoon lessons in college, Hendricks was basically self-taught. He and a friend at East St. Louis Senior High School

asked the band director if they could step out of their overpopulated saxophone section and take on more complicated double-reed instruments instead. “At first, a lot of it was just figuring out how to put a bassoon together,” he says with a laugh.

Pleasant, who came to UMSL from Ritenour High School, took up the violin in sixth grade after watching his brother, five years his senior, play. “But it really didn’t become a passion until high school,” he says. “My music teacher at the time just really brought out the beauty of music and how large it really is. She definitely opened my eyes to the power of music.”

Playing in the St. Louis Symphony Youth Orchestra—and in the august surroundings of Powell Hall—has made a deep impression on the trio. “That would have sealed the deal right there,” Pleasant says with a chuckle. “I mean, regardless of how good the orchestra is, we get to play at Powell? OK.”

To be sure, the orchestra is good—and then some. “It’s exhilarating to be surrounded with musicians of your own caliber or higher,” Hendricks says. “That feeds my energy, so I’m more excited to play.”

Clark’s signature experience with the Youth Orchestra actually came before he was an official member. An extra percussionist was needed and Clark was allowed to sit in on bass drum. “After the rehearsal, I thought I had the fewest notes to play out of everyone in the group, maybe five or

...continued on page 60

Forward Momentum

...continued from page 13



Matthew Clark (left) and Joseph Hendricks (right) of the St. Louis Symphony Youth Orchestra

six notes,” he says. “But I remember how big a deal they made out of those few notes I was playing. They wanted to make it seem like it was the most beautiful five or six notes you will ever play. I thought, ‘Oh my God, this is such a high standard.’”

And so it is. And just as Owens has managed to pay his In Unison experience forward, Clark, Pleasant, and Hendricks hope to as well: Clark as a music educator, Pleasant as a professional violinist, and

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—JOSEPH HENDRICKS

Hendricks as a music librarian or an administrator for an arts organization.

Helping them get there is part of Owens’ job. Or as he describes it, “helping them hone what they may already know and introducing them to some other things that they may not have considered.

“The key,” he says, “is to impress upon them that ‘you have something valuable to offer in this world and you want to offer it in its best possible form.’”

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Daniel Durchholz is a St. Louis freelance writer.