

HARMONIC CONVERGENCES

CONDUCTING SEEMS TO BE STEVEN JARVI'S DESTINY. OF COURSE,
LUCK FAVORS THE CHRONICALLY OVER-PREPARED.

BY STEFENE RUSSELL



Steven Jarvi conducting the YO in November

It's Saturday afternoon at Powell Hall, and the St. Louis Symphony Youth Orchestra is on stage, warming up; the auditorium's a din of squeaks and trills. Steven Jarvi, St. Louis Symphony Resident Conductor and Music Director of the Youth Orchestra, hops on the wooden conductor's platform, baton in hand.

"Let's start with the Wagner," Jarvi tells the kids, who range in age from 12 to 22. They launch into the *Rienzi* Overture, only to be stopped several bars in. "This is a heavy march," Jarvi tells them. It needs to sound clipped, disciplined, Wagnerian—archetypally German. He tells them to think of the precision of military exercises, but also gleaming Mercedes and BMWs, the products of German ingenuity and efficiency. In later sections, the mood lightens. "Can you hide the bow changes, and make it sound more elegant?" he asks the first violins, demonstrating with a string of sung *la-la-las*. This section, he explains, is no march; it's hang-glider music.

"The way that I approach rehearsing young people is pretty much the same way that I approach rehearsing professionals," Jarvi explains later. "I'm

just giving them more information to get to that final goal. So maybe I have to provide technical solutions, or maybe I can tell them a silly story to put information in their brains, which is better than me just saying ‘That’s down-bow, please.’”

Ashley Cox, a junior at Francis Howell, plays in the trombone section; this is her first year with Youth Orchestra. As a freshman, she was more of a jazz person. Now, she’d like to play in an orchestra. “He’s really animated,” she says of Jarvi, which makes the rehearsals fun. “He gives us feedback that helps us, but in a way that resonates with us so that we can use it.”

Phoebe Yao, viola, and Maddie O’Reilly-Brown, violin, both of Clayton High School, agree. “He’s really funny,” Yao says. “He makes everything light, and happy. He’s very motivational, very dedicated. Plus he’s relatively young. He doesn’t just act young, he is young, so it’s easier for us to relate.” (For the record: Jarvi’s a very youthful 35.)

“He also likes modern music, 20th and 21st century music,” O’Reilly-Brown adds. “He played us this weird ’90s tonal music for us, kind of semi-classical, but we got into it.”

Jarvi also connects with young musicians because he knows so well what it’s like to be one. Growing up in tiny New Haven, Michigan, he looked forward to visits at his grandparents’ house in Detroit partly because they had a piano; even at two, he couldn’t keep his fingers off the keys. He started formal piano lessons at five, and then played saxophone in the New Haven High School band. But that didn’t give him much opportunity to play classical music. “So I started arranging saxophone quintets of classical music—Pachelbel’s Canon for five saxes, and the ‘Little’ Fugue in G minor by Bach. This is when I found that I had sort of a knack for leadership—and musical leadership, at that,” he says.

While still in high school, he conducted Cole Porter’s “You’re the Top,” at a tribute concert for his retiring band teacher, Craig Flahive. After the show, Murray Gross, conductor of the West Shore Symphony Orchestra, approached him and asked him if he’d ever considered conducting professionally. “And I said, ‘You can do that?’ Jarvi laughs. “I thought you could be a band director, and that conductors were just like these magic old men: ‘Leopold, Leopold!’

you know, like with the white gloves, like Bugs Bunny.” At 17, he became Gross’s assistant conductor; his first job was to lead the off-stage chorus for Holst’s *The Planets* (he purchased his first blazer for that show). That helped him gain entrance to the University of Michigan, where

Jarvi leads the YO



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he studied music theory, which was followed by studies at the Peabody Conservatory at Johns Hopkins, where he worked with legendary conductor Gustav Meier. After graduation, Jarvi moved to New York with \$1,000 in his pocket, he says, “and no plan.”

Jarvi lived on 65th Street and worked in the New York Philharmonic box office. During that time he also moonlighted at small orchestras and opera companies, for little money—eventually attracting the attention of the Washington National Opera and

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Placido Domingo. After acing the audition for the Domigno-Cafritz Young Artists Program, he flew to L.A. to work with Domingo during the World Opera Competition. What would he conduct, he asked? There’s no way to know, they told him—we don’t know even know who’ll make the semi-finals. So, as a self-described chronic over-preparer, Jarvi photocopied every major tenor aria from the New York Philharmonic’s music library before boarding his flight. Near the end of the residency, after not being thrown into the conducting rotation, he jokingly told Domingo, “Maestro, let’s just get this over with—I have a whole book of tenor arias. You could just sing something...” Domingo agreed. “To which my head exploded,” Jarvi says. “So we just went into a room, and he sang the first tenor aria from *Tosca*.” And because that was too easy, Domingo requested the Act Three aria from

La bohème. “So I’m probably the only conductor in history,” Jarvi says, “to have conducted Placido Domingo singing the role of Mimi.” Domingo gave him the job.

Since then, Jarvi’s resume has grown to include a Seiji Ozawa Conducting Fellow at Tanglewood Music Center, as well as conducting positions with the New World Symphony in Miami; the New York Opera; and the Kansas City Symphony. When he joined the St. Louis Symphony last year, he already had one foot planted here: he’s been Music Director for Saint Louis Winter Opera since 2010. Last November, he and wife Joanne put down even deeper roots, welcoming a baby boy, Noah, into the family. (They also have a dog, Roman, who has his own Tumblr.)

“I’ve worked for a lot of places, and I’ve had a lot of people recognize me on the street,” he says. Usually the first thing they say is “Great show,” or that he has an interesting job. “Here in St. Louis, the first thing people say to me is ‘Thank you,’” he says. “I get a little misty when that happens—that’s not normally the thing you hear.” And of course, he says, it’s an honor to work alongside a master like David Robertson, to be part of the second oldest orchestra in the country, and mentor young musicians, just as he was mentored.

“I look three times when I’m crossing every street,” Jarvi says, “because life’s being too good to me right now.”

*The St. Louis Symphony Youth Orchestra
performs Sunday, March 23 at 3 p.m.
at Powell Hall. Tickets are free
with a \$1 service fee.*

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