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A World of Possibilities

STANFORD THOMPSON (TRUMPET '09) OFFERS A NEW PATH TO 200 BUDDING MUSICIANS EACH YEAR.

BY AMY MILLER

Sir Simon Rattle. Yo-Yo Ma. Wynton Marsalis. Yannick Nézet-Séguin. Time for Three. They are more than names on the banners of Philadelphia’s Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts (among other great arts centers of the world). They are also artists who have gone some thirty blocks west to an urban Catholic elementary school, to coach students in Play On, Philly! (POP), an ambitious after-school music program founded in 2010 by Stanford Thompson.

Here in the auditorium of St. Francis de Sales School, 120 children aged 5 to 14 gather daily for group lessons, music literacy classes, and ensembles. An additional 80 students participate in POP’s second site at Freire Charter Middle School in Center City Philadelphia. Most of these enthusiastic and exuberant youngsters live below the poverty line, so POP is provided tuition-free. Because demand is higher than the number of available spaces, students are selected from a lottery to participate. Their teachers are freelance professional musicians; several are Curtis graduates.

Mr. Thompson’s inspiration came from Venezuela’s famously successful El Sistema program. But his guiding principle comes from his Curtis training: “How can we take a Curtis experience—that is, the highest-quality music education—to a group of kids that wouldn’t usually get it?” He’s not aiming for his students to get into Curtis, although he doesn’t see why they couldn’t. Rather, “we want to completely eradicate the social problems our students have, in terms of the achievement gap, violence, high school dropout rates, confidence, and self-esteem,” he asserts. “POP embraces a philosophy of using classical music at the highest levels to do that.”

The program’s classes, lessons, and rehearsals are rigorous, so that students can achieve high performance standards and quickly learn a wide range of repertoire—from standards such as Brahms’s First Symphony, to premieres by esteemed composers including Curtis faculty member Richard Danielpour, to their own arrangements of popular songs such as the Beatles’s “Hey Jude” (which included a rap interlude). Performances happen as frequently as every two weeks.

This intense schedule and emphasis on high standards are necessary to achieve the program’s goals. “We reframed the argument from POP being a music education program to being a skill-building program,” says Mr. Thompson. “How do we help them get the tools they need to be the best people they can be?” He quickly adds, “We tend not to coddle them. I don’t want people to say, ‘Oh, that’s so cute.’ I want people to say, ‘Those kids can play!’”



And they do. “I am shocked and overjoyed every time I hear our children play, and I think it has opened a world of possibilities for them for the future,” says Sister Mary McNulty, principal of St. Francis de Sales School. “They fall in love with music.”

GIVING BACK

Mr. Thompson’s interest in giving back to the community was apparent from his arrival at Curtis as a student. “From the first minute I met Stan, I noticed his desire to develop programs for young musicians,” recalls Mary Loiselle, recently retired director of community engagement and career development services. She remembers the young trumpeter taking advantage of everything the school had to offer in community engagement, “from hearing guest speakers to our Foundations of Engagement class.”

An “idea on a sheet of paper” for this class grew into the Reading (Pa.) Summer Music Institute, which Mr. Thompson ran for five seasons, gaining his first teaching, management, and fundraising experience. After graduating from Curtis, he was encouraged by then-dean Robert Fitzpatrick to attend the Abreu Fellowship Program at the New England Conservatory, where study in the El Sistema approach inspired the guiding philosophy for POP.

Today, Mr. Thompson frequently invites Curtis students, faculty, and alumni, as well as other musical luminaries, to provide coaching and participate in side-by-side rehearsals. POP students, he says, “think I’m kind of cool because I know all of these famous people. The inspiration that these kids get from Curtis—if that’s what they’re looking up to, and it’s an example that’s just down the street, we need to get them connected as often as possible.”

The program’s results speak volumes. POP reports that its students have better school attendance rates, academic subject scores, and standardized test results—even compared to those who participate in other after-school activities. POP alumni participate in prestigious youth orchestras and summer programs, take private lessons with members of the Philadelphia Orchestra, and attend the city’s best high schools. Many return to mentor current POP students. What’s more, says Sister McNulty, “they believe in themselves, they feel happy, and they know that they’re doing something great.” Mr. Thompson hopes to expand POP into more schools, engaging students from pre-kindergarten through high school. He wants as many children as possible to benefit from this type of educational program in Philadelphia.

While establishing POP, Mr. Thompson has stayed active as a performer, playing with several orchestras and chamber groups in Philadelphia. He also serves on the communications and patron engagement committee of the Curtis board; and chairs the Curtis Alumni Council, connecting with fellow graduates while on speaking and consulting trips nationwide. “I’ve learned a lot of the history of the institution, and there are many things that haven’t changed in terms of the musical connections that have been passed down.

“The school has been so supportive to us in so many ways,” he adds. “You never graduate.” ♦

Amy Miller is Curtis’s director of institutional giving. Her blog, Recovering Oboist, features interviews with professional musicians who also have non-music careers.

Above from left:

Stanford Thompson PHOTO: ANNA WU

Clarinetists Sanah Jones and Tamia Johnson
PHOTO: ALBERT YEE

Khaliyah Hill, horn, and Indya Fields, bassoon
PHOTO: ALBERT YEE

Simon Rattle conducted the Play On Philly!
Orchestra in Verizon Hall in 2012. PHOTO: STEVE KRULL

Bassoonist Empress Graham PHOTO: ALBERT YEE

Stanford Thompson coaches violin student
Naim Cogdell. PHOTO: ALBERT YEE

Stanford Thompson conducts a Play On Philly!
Orchestra rehearsal. PHOTO: ALBERT YEE