



Making Harmonies Happen: Community Orchestra Rehearsals Underway

By Trena Taralson

Cosette Justo Valdés leads a Community Orchestra rehearsal

“Dragon slayer is my favourite piece.”

“YONA medley is my favourite piece.”

“Uptown funk is my favourite to play. I like the part that has lots of notes!”

Students in the Community Orchestra have been enjoying the chance to rehearse together over the past couple months. Comprised of mostly 2nd and 3rd year YONA students, 37 youth from our Edmonton sites have been coming together every couple weeks since November to develop their ensemble skills.

These opportunities are only possible because of the generosity of YONA donors, who supported our Giving Tuesday campaign back in November. You raised \$14,154 for YONA – and with the incredible matching commitment from EPCOR to donate \$2 for every \$1 raised, up to \$25,000, we were able to raise \$39,154 for YONA!

When asked about the opportunity to rehearse together, one YONA student was quick to offer gratitude, “Thank you donors, for providing the bussing!”

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This funding will cover our transportation costs for all YONA concerts and rehearsals this season and help support other areas of the program.

New and exciting this year is the addition of Cosette Justo Valdés as lead conductor for the intermediate level Community Orchestra, in addition to her role as the Artistic Director and conductor of the senior level La Bruyère Orchestra. Staff at YONA knew this would be an excellent opportunity for more students to benefit from her expertise.

“Cosette is an incredible conductor and musician. Our students’ musicianship grows as they work with excellent musicians,” says YONA Lead Jacquie McNulty.

When asked about the overall benefits of these rehearsals, McNulty reinforced that these

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- Jacquie McNulty, YONA Lead

experiences are at the core of what the program is about.

“We know that ensemble music making is a transformative experience and through the generous support of our community, we are able to make this happen in a regular and meaningful way for our students.” 🎵



The First Note:

St. Alphonsus Instrument Graduation 2023

By Rudy Howell



A group of 23 YONA students at St. Alphonsus Catholic School will not soon forget November 1, 2023. It was the day 17 flute and six double bass students traded in their recorders and cardboard basses to play the first note on their real orchestral instruments.

The event marked the second of three instrument graduations for YONA Year 11. During the emotional ceremony, students replaced their recorders with flutes and cardboard double basses with wooden ones. In attendance were family, friends, teachers, YONA staff, and supporters.

With big smiles, the graduates entered the gymnasium to the beat of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy," played by students of the YONA Community Orchestra. The double bass students carried their cardboard instruments with them. One by one, students took their seats facing their proud families who applauded as "Ode to Joy" came to an end.

Next, YONA flute teaching artist Alex Valle led her students in singing "The Welcome Song" and "The YONA Way," which kick off each class and help teach students about their YONA duties. These songs were followed by "Ollie's Song" and

"Hot Cross Buns," which teach the students about dynamics, breath control, and blowing techniques.

Double bass students then had their time to shine, led by teaching artist Andreas Wegner. They sang "The Ant Song," "Up Like a Rocket," and "This Is My Double Bass." These songs collectively teach students the names of the double bass strings, which direction to play the fingerboard, and the physical parts of their instrument.

Then came the big moment when students lined up to receive their orchestral instruments and sign the 'Instrument Care Agreement.' Each student must sign this formal document before receiving their real orchestral instrument to ensure they treat



it with care and respect throughout the school year. Musical Creativity Director Anne-Marie Switzer took this time to read aloud each clause of the flute and double bass agreements to inform the audience of what properly caring for an orchestral instrument looks like.

With patience, the students waited for the 'Magical Musical Moment.' This is the highlight of every YONA instrument graduation when students get to play their new instruments for the very first time.

The audience joined the students in counting down from 10 before an eruption of sound echoed throughout the gymnasium. Bass and flute notes clashed together in a symphony of youthful excitement that made parents laugh and cry.

Afterward, there was time for photographs before the students dug into a tasty mix of cookies, fruit, and carrot sticks. Then, just as they entered the gymnasium, they left – only this time with a real instrument in hand. 🎵



YONA Spotlight: Timothy, 2nd year flute student



Q. What is your favourite part of your day at YONA?

My favourite part is learning new stuff, new notes, how to do the fingerings of the notes. I also love playing with the orchestra because it sounds amazing.

Q: Tell us about your teacher at YONA?

Ms. Natalie is really kind, respectful, she's caring, she likes helping people with music, she's generous.

Q. What is something you're proud to have learned to do with your instrument?

I'm proud of learning how to play because I haven't played an instrument since I left my home country of Nigeria. I played drums before.

Q. What's your favourite piece of music to play?

Wallace and Gromit.

Q. What is something you want everyone to know about YONA?

It's really good, they teach you how to play an instrument. You have a good time here.

Say Cheese: Snack Time at YONA

By Rudy Howell

At YONA, 3 p.m. can only mean one thing – snack time. Five days a week, across four sites, our 125 students receive a mixture of healthy and wholesome snacks provided by our generous Nutrition Sponsor, Cameron Corporation.

Students are given their choice of fruit, dairy, and grain items, providing a healthy balance of vitamins and minerals. These items commonly include apples, oranges, bananas, yogurt tubes, cheese strings, rice crackers, and muffins. On special occasions, treats like popcorn can be found among the YONA snack offerings.

“All kids deserve to have a full stomach when they’re learning, and snack time provides that.”

- Naomi Reitzin, YONA Site Manager

“All kids deserve to have a full stomach when they’re learning, and snack time provides that. Giving them a free snack that their parents don’t have to worry about helps their day and their ability to focus and participate,” said Naomi Reitzin, Site Manager, YONA St. Alphonsus.

Snack time is as much about leisure as it is about teaching our students the YONA way – to show respect, listen carefully, do their best every day, and have fun. They learn not to take more than their fair share and always make an effort to include their peers in activities and conversation – no child sits alone during snack time.

Through snack time, YONA students also learn to care for their classrooms to the same degree as their instruments. Before lessons begin, it is the responsibility of the students to dispose of their trash appropriately and return their uneaten snacks to their instructors. This ensures leftovers can be eaten during break and at home after class.

Socialization is another critical element of snack time at YONA. The opportunity to unwind with food and friends after a long school day is invaluable to our students. One cannot help but smile when listening to the sound of snack-time laughter reverberating through the hallways of a YONA site.

“It is a very relaxed and safe environment for them to eat and share with friends. It really brightens their day when they get to have a good time with each other before they get into their lessons,” said Reitzin.

Every day, students and teachers alike look forward to snack time, which remains a crucial aspect of YONA’s holistic approach to education and social support. On behalf of our growing YONA family, the Edmonton Symphony Society extends its gratitude to Cameron Corporation for ensuring our students continue to have the nutritious snacks they need to succeed. 🎵



YONA students enjoying a snack



Donate to YONA-Sistema

You can support the future of YONA-Sistema by donating money, time, or instruments.

When you give, you put a musical instrument in the hands of a child. This can become so much more than a simple vessel for sound – it can become an instrument for growth, development, and change. Every gift, great or small, makes a difference in the life of a child and contributes to social change in our community.

Through YONA-Sistema, youth in Northern Alberta's priority neighbourhoods will experience an extraordinary opportunity for social, emotional, academic, and musical development. They will develop lifelong values and skills that will promote the future success of these youth and of their communities.

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