

Strings Remain Attached for International Youth Orchestra

By: Haley Eshleman

If you ask the teenagers who make up the Toledo International Youth Orchestra if they find other youth orchestras intimidating, they will collectively laugh and most likely say, “yes!”

Playing a combined concert with another youth orchestra two years ago in Poland – with young musicians who they referred to top of the line for their country – they felt this intimidation more than ever, but as natural as anything else, they pulled off the concert.

“We always manage to put together a combined concert with very few rehearsals, which goes to show that music really is an international language,” said Lee Ann Song, a cellist and daughter of Conductor Yang Kun Song. “We really didn’t have to talk with them much to put the piece together.”

Now in their tenth season, and originally begun by Conductor Mr. Song, TIYO is taking their annual trip to Vienna, Austria this July for the Summa Cum Laude International Youth Music Festival and Competition. Other stops include Szeged, Hungary – a sister city of Toledo – and Budapest and Salzburg.

The group has been given the honor of being the only youth orchestra representing the United States in this competition. This year, 22 of the 55 member orchestra will be taking the trip. As an all string group, they will be playing songs particularly distinctive to America, such as the John Williams trilogy used in Star Wars – a piece considered very complex for a youth orchestra.

“[The competition] got a lot more serious!” Treasurer Sally Russ said of the pressure they now face as the only U.S. group attending the competition.

In Vienna, they will encounter youth orchestras from all over the world. This interaction excites the TIYO staff and musicians. “It’s what I look forward to most when we go,” Lee Ann said of interacting with other student orchestras. “Every single time we’ve traveled we’ve met with kids there. In China we went to a couple of high schools and in Europe we went to a couple of music schools.”

And some trips touch TIYO on a deeper level. Last years trip took the group to the less fortunate Tanga, Tanzania, to the Toledo Secondary school. TIYO raised \$3,000 at a benefit concert before their departure. The funds helped build the music room. They also donated ten violins and held another fundraiser at the end of 2009 to get instructors in the African school.

“So now they have a music room, the instruments, and the teachers,” said TIYO President Liz Villarreal. “All sponsored by friends of TIYO.” The stories and experiences made in Tanga carry on today as TIYO still feels very attached to the school there.

“I’ve been emailing with the principal in Africa, and a lot of us would like to go back as instructors since they do have all the violins and music,” said LeeAnn, who organized the end-of-the year fundraiser at her high school to get music teachers in Tanga. “That would be really nice if we could go back and teach them. We talked about it seriously last year when we came home!”

Russ added, “The kids that went to Africa last year were changed in a very positive way. One of the students told me she was changed forever. And she has changed forever. That was her first trip to a country that was poor.”

The mission of TIYO is “to achieve better understanding of other cultures and bridge cultural differences through music” which is something TIYO holds dear to their hearts. Mr. Song shared that TIYO plans to visit the sister cities of Toledo through their trips. One way they honor the city is by playing the national anthem. They have also played for the Cherry Street Mission here in Toledo among many fundraising concerts, including supporting the Morgan Duris scholarship that allows a member of TIYO to travel on the international trip.

While TIYO is made up of kids ages 10 – 19, TIYO graduates often come back to visit and play again. Currently two Bowling Green State University students still participate with the youth orchestra. Both on violin, Mark Minnich is the Concert Master and Sally Williams is Principal Second Violin. They coach sectionals for violins. “In the orchestra, things on an individual basis get lost and we can help them,” Williams said.

Both Williams and Minnich, who also perform together under the name Revamped Duo, have more schooling, performing and potential teaching careers ahead. With the many fine art programs being cut in schools across the U.S., both had some thoughts to share. “It’s happening everywhere,” Minnich said.” It’s a shame that people don’t know how much music does for kids. I did a couple research papers on this and how much it develops your brain and gets you involved in social activities.” Williams added, “The time and effort and diligence it takes to learn an instrument would transfer over to any other subject.”

If there is one thing evident among TIYO members, it’s the many benefits they find through sharing music. Not only do they have stories of international friendship, success and touching lives here in Toledo, they want to continue touching lives for different cultures.

Lee Ann said, “I’m really interested in going to a third world country my second year, a lot of colleges offer that. After going to Africa, I feel like I really want to go somewhere else.”

The Toledo International Youth Orchestra and S.C.O.R.E. foundation are performing “A World of Care Spring Concert” on Sunday, May 30, 4 p.m. at Westgate Chapel. The concert is dedicated to Morgan Duris, a TIYO member and Sylvania high schooler who was killed when she crossed the street to get on the bus earlier this year. Following the concert, attendees can show their tickets at Buffalo Wild Wings at Central Ave. and McCord where a percent of sale proceeds will benefit TIYO.

More information about TIYO can be found at www.tiyo.us.