

There are no tuxedos and no footlights onstage as the sounds of Stravinsky's *The Firebird* fill Chicago's Symphony Hall. Suddenly, conductor Pierre Boulez, dressed in a turtleneck and loose-fitting suit, brings the Chicago Symphony Orchestra to a halt and asks the t-shirt-and-jeans-clad musicians to make various dynamic markings in their parts. During pauses in the music, Boulez discusses passages with musicians. More unusual, however, is who else is present: for about two and a half hours, scattered audience members sit quietly in attendance, observing how conductor and musicians build a rapport and work out kinks in the performance, searching for the ever-elusive artistic perfection.

For the symphony orchestras of Boston, Bremerton (Wash.), Chicago, Cobb County (Ga.), Delaware, and San Diego, there are numerous benefits to opening rehearsals to

the public and allowing the audience to hear a work in progress, and watching the conductor-musician relationship unfold. The ensemble gets valuable audience feedback, hears how different works sound with people in the hall, and presents a more approachable, human image to those in attendance. Audiences benefit, too. An open rehearsal is an opportunity to hear how a conductor and orchestra polish the music for a particular concert. Each rehearsal allows the public to understand the artistic process and the relationship between conductor and orchestra. And a rehearsal is an attractive option for those who cannot afford regularly priced concert tickets, do not want to drive at night, or are not scheduled to hear a particular concert as part of their subscription.

"It's fascinating to watch the rehearsal process," says [Chicago Symphony Orchestra](#) patron Thomas Sinkovic. "Very rarely do you have the experience of seeing what a conductor actually does. Each conductor

Dan Rust

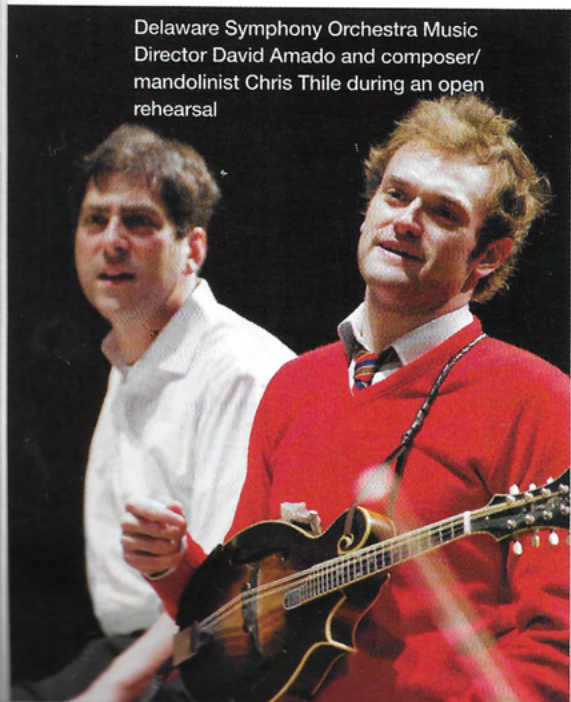


Open

by Greg Waxberg

When orchestras invite the

Delaware Symphony Orchestra Music Director David Amado and composer/mandolinist Chris Thile during an open rehearsal



JOE GEE TUD

has his own style and personality, which I have not necessarily been aware of during a formal performance. Some will immediately cut off the orchestra when they hear something they want to call attention to. Some will play through the whole movement and then come back. Almost with photographic memory and no pencils or pens, they can call attention to something, and have the orchestra re-play it."

For many orchestras, there is a strong education and audience-development component to open rehearsals, which represent an excellent opportunity for students to develop an appreciation for what goes into serious music-making. Students and the general public alike, often drawn to open rehearsals

by the reduced or even free admission, see a more accessible, humanized orchestra and may be more inclined to try out one of the orchestra's regular concerts.

Not For Adults Only

Cayenne Harris, director of learning and access initiatives at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, notes that because open rehearsals serve as important access points for students, the CSO's rehearsals for high school students include question-and-answer sessions with the musicians. Harris says students want to know about things like the audition process, the number of rehearsals for each program, and setup procedures for the stage. They are also curious about the conductor's



Chicago Symphony Orchestra open rehearsals feature a question-and-answer session for students.

HOUSE

Public to rehearsals

or guest artist's favorite composers or pieces. Other questions focus on how extensively the musicians practice, other kinds of music they like, where they attended school, and details about specific works on the program.

These experiences give younger music students fresh insights into rehearsal and orchestral repertoire, and music teachers gain ideas for improving their rehearsal techniques. The Boston Symphony Orchestra's High School Open Rehearsals, tailored for grades 8 to 12, begin at 10:30 a.m. with a pre-rehearsal discussion led by an orchestra musician, featured composer, or conductor. An hour later, students have an insider's view of a typical rehearsal, where the conductor's and musicians' interaction is shown on two

large flat-screen televisions that sit on either side of the stage. On occasion, a question-and-answer session with the conductor and/or guest artist takes place after the rehearsal.

"We've been extremely impressed by the students' attentiveness during the rehearsals," says Steve Lester, a CSO bass player and chairman of the Members Committee. "Their questions afterward reflect that attentiveness, and usually a substantial amount of knowledge."

An enthusiastic supporter of the CSO rehearsals is Dennis Friesen-Carper, Reddel professor of music at Valparaiso University in Indiana and music director of the Valparaiso-based American International Youth Symphony Orchestra. Friesen-Carper brings his



Guest conductor Miguel Harth-Bedoya and cellist Yo-Yo Ma take questions from students following an open rehearsal at Chicago's Symphony Hall.

Valparaiso students to a rehearsal once each semester. “For performance majors, it’s an inspiration and a reality check,” he says. “For student conductors, it is a revealing contrast to their school and community ensemble experience. For composers and the orchestration class, it’s invaluable to hear such incredible playing and to observe sound-shaping, such as how a conductor solves concerto balance problems with articulation and color, as well as dynamics.” He has also noticed that more students go to concerts after attending open rehearsals. “The CSO is building an audience for this important music through humanizing the experience of going to the symphony,” Friesen-Carper says.

At the San Diego Symphony’s open rehearsals for college and high school students, the audience is advised about appropriate behavior before entering the hall. “I’ve never had a musician or conductor complain about students,” says Adrienne Valencia, the orchestra’s director of education and outreach. She says that Music Director Jahja Ling runs open rehearsals like any other rehearsal, “so the attendees are experiencing the rehearsal just as the musicians would normally experience it. The schools understand that they are just a ‘fly on the wall’ and that they are there to watch and observe how a typical rehearsal takes place and unfolds.” The musicians occasionally use part of their breaks to visit with the audience and answer questions, which the attendees thoroughly enjoy.

Sometimes, developing an audience through open rehearsals begins at an even earlier age. Alan Futterman, music director of the Bremerton Symphony Association in the town of Bremerton, Washington, has seen many families bring young children to his rehearsals, which are open to students and the general public. “I have been asked over the years if children disrupt rehearsals,” says Futterman. “In twenty years, this has never happened. In-



John Condon

Michael Alexander leads a Cobb Symphony Orchestra rehearsal.

variably, these children sit in rapt attention, completely engaged in the music. We have seen these children grow to become our students. Later, many become our patrons and buy concert tickets, and a few now play in an orchestra professionally.”

One such person is Jeremy Kurtz, principal bass in the San Diego Symphony. During high school, he was a member of the National Symphony Orchestra’s Youth Fellowship Program, which required him to attend NSO rehearsals every month. “The rehearsals gave me a window into the real working lives of professional symphonic musicians,” Kurtz says, “and made a much stronger impression on me than simply watching a polished concert. I was able to see what was really involved in the preparation of great performances, and this allowed me to start imagining myself in their shoes. I don’t think I seriously considered a career as an orchestral musician until I began attending those open rehearsals.”

Timing is a key factor in allowing students and families to attend. The CSO’s rehearsals for students almost always begin at 10 a.m., a convenient time for high schools. “On occasion, we invite students to an orchestra rehearsal that includes the Chicago Symphony Chorus, and those rehearsals begin at 4:30 p.m.,” the Chicago Symphony’s Cayenne Harris says. “The late start time is much more challenging for school groups. These afternoon rehearsals allow us to broaden the invitation for open rehearsals, and in recent years we have welcomed groups of senior citizens, students from area community music schools and participants in ongoing partnership programs.”

At the Boston Symphony, high school

open rehearsals are required to take place at the same time as regular open rehearsals because the rehearsal schedule is a contracted service in the orchestra’s calendar. (Regular open rehearsals take place Wednesdays at 7:30 p.m. or Thursdays at 10:30 a.m., while high school open rehearsals take place on separate Thursdays at 10:30 a.m.) The Bremerton Symphony’s open rehearsals take place in the evening, and there are open dress rehearsals in the mornings. Futterman has noticed that more students attend evening rehearsals, while the morning dress rehearsals attract more families with children who are interested in getting close to the instruments.

Breaking the Price Barrier

One question orchestras must face in planning open rehearsals is whether to charge admission. The Boston Symphony’s open rehearsals at Symphony Hall generate approximately \$300,000 in revenue each year, an important part of the orchestra’s overall revenue stream, although tickets for the high school open rehearsals are less expensive than tickets for regular rehearsals—\$10 versus \$19. The net income from open rehearsals at Symphony Hall and Tanglewood benefits the orchestra’s Pension Fund, in accordance with the musicians’ contract.

“Open rehearsal tickets are cheaper than a regular seat, but they help to offset the cost of a rehearsal,” says Todd Youngblood, board chair of the Cobb Symphony Orchestra, which performs in the Atlanta suburbs of Kennesaw and Marietta, Georgia. “They also provide an opportunity for those who can’t afford a normal ticket. Ideally, they would be free.” Many students attend the



Pat Brenson

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Cobb Symphony's rehearsals, which are open to the general public. Admission helps cover the cost of pizza for attendees, a fun perk for students.

Free admission can also make a statement. "My philosophy is to keep the open rehearsals free," says the Bremerton Symphony's Futterman. "Allowing the public free access is a great community service and makes for great public relations."

For the Delaware Symphony Orchestra, based in Wilmington, free admission is mandatory. The orchestra's collective bargaining agreement does not allow open rehearsals to generate any revenue, and the musicians' labor committee would have to sign a contract waiver to allow more than 100 people in the hall. The DSO offers open rehearsals to students and to donors and subscribers who contribute at a certain level. Donors who attend open rehearsals "feel a closer connection to the orchestra," says Director of Development Christopher van Bergen, "not only encouraging them to increase their giving, but also become advocates for the orchestra within the community."

Bergen says that Music Director David Amado and musicians of the orchestra understand the value of engaging the members of the DSO's family of donors as well as presenting their craft to area students. "They do not feel that having an audience during a rehearsal affects the creative process. If anything, they are inspired by it," he says. Amado makes a point of speaking to donors and students prior to open rehearsals, discussing the pieces that the audience is going to hear, giving his insights into the program, and drawing attention to particular passages that the audience should listen for.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra also opens its rehearsals to patrons who donate at certain levels, and CSO President Deborah Rutter always begins the rehearsal with a special thank you to the patrons. "It makes you feel that the CSO is genuinely appreciative of your support," says CSO patron Thomas Sinkovic.

The CSO's Harris believes that free admission is appropriate. "Because these are working rehearsals, the educational component has to take a back seat to the primary purpose of the event," she says, "which is to prepare the orchestra for the concert." The San Diego Symphony does not charge for its open rehearsals, either. "Even if we did," Valencia says, "the amount would be so

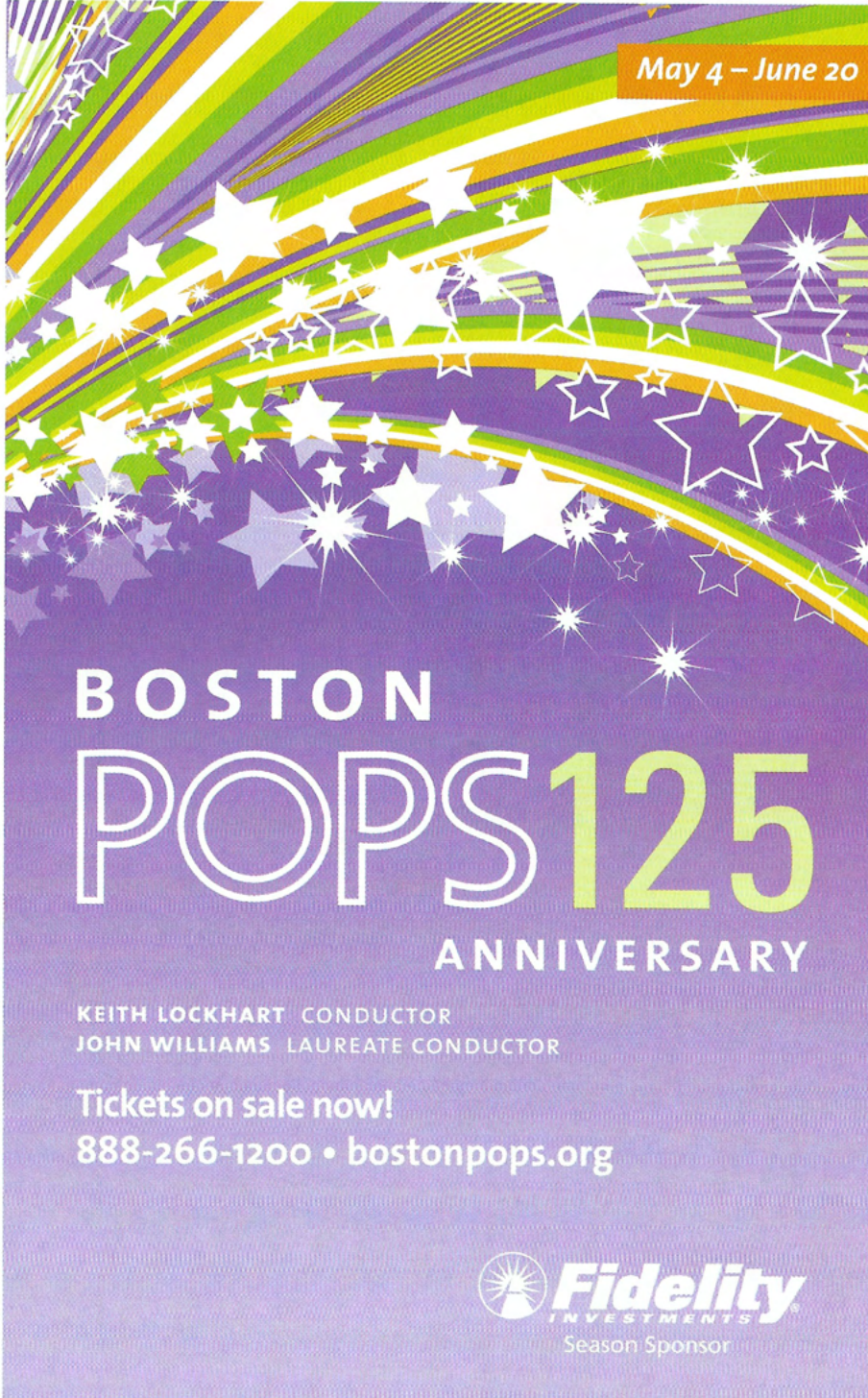
small it wouldn't really make a difference. Plus, many schools have to secure a bus to attend, so that's a cost to them."

Up Close and Personal

One benefit of open rehearsals is making orchestras more approachable: the musicians are dressed informally and the setting is more relaxed. Students may see that orchestra members are more like them than they realized before. "The rehearsal allows

students to see that musicians are real people," says Harris. "They make mistakes, they laugh at jokes, and, most importantly, with the help of the conductor, they focus and come together to achieve the desired result." General seating adds to that sense of accessibility and offers other benefits, including the chance to sit closer to the stage and hear the music from different vantage points.

The closer connection between orchestra
(continued on page 42) >>




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and audience could raise a concern about whether it is distracting to have an audience at rehearsals. But orchestras themselves report few problems with audience disruption. "We tell conductors to run a rehearsal as they need to achieve the best musical results," says Anthony Fogg, artistic administrator of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. He notes that the conductor "may welcome everyone and perhaps explain what is going to happen in a rehearsal, such as that a singer may be 'marking' or that he or she will be concentrating on certain works or sections of a work. On occasion, I've heard a conductor jokingly ask the audience whether a passage should be rehearsed again!"

Nancy Saunders, a Delaware Symphony donor and subscriber, attends rehearsals frequently because she likes to see the concert as a work-in-progress, and she believes her fellow attendees feel the same way. "I can see what [the conductor and musicians are] working toward and, as a result, I enjoy the concert more," she says. "I get the feeling that the audience appreciates what the musicians go through and, more than that, they appreciate that they're allowed to be there to watch this production be put together."

Orchestras say they often benefit from having the people in the hall, inviting feedback from the audience on passages in the works being rehearsed. "It is one thing to rehearse and perfect a work in an empty hall," the Bremerton Symphony's Futterman says. "While this allows us to finely hone the technical aspects of a piece, it does not let us gauge the impact that a movement, a section, or even a single phrase will have on listeners. In rehearsal, we may try performing a phrase with different inflections, different emphasis, or different pacing." Audiences will voice their approval by clapping, or, if Futterman turns around, a thumbs-up. "I have also observed that the orchestra enjoys playing for an audience and almost always plays its best at the open rehearsal."

"Audience members are much more likely to approach the conductor at the end of a rehearsal than after a concert,"
Bremerton Symphony Music Director Alan Futterman says. "Typical after concert figures dressed in tails who retire to the Green Room."



The BSO's Fogg also notes the difference in acoustics between an empty hall and one at least partially filled with patrons—80 percent full in most cases. "Open rehearsals provide the conductor and soloist the opportunity to experience a performance under concert conditions," he says. "The acoustics of Symphony Hall—as great as they are—are a little different when the auditorium is empty versus full. An open rehearsal gives the performers a better approximation of concert conditions, which is especially useful if an artist is performing in Symphony Hall for the first time."

Michael Alexander, music director of the Cobb Symphony Orchestra, describes the atmosphere at open rehearsals as "cordial and intense." Because the orchestra comes prepared, he says, "it should never be a problem to have people watch it." Alexander says he speaks to the audience before the rehearsal and chats during breaks, but refrains from doing so during the rehearsal "so they can feel what a normal rehearsal is like."

Futterman says that audiences attending the Bremerton Symphony's rehearsals are at least as engaged as the orchestra's concert audiences. "Audience members are much more likely to approach the conductor at the end of a rehearsal than after a concert," he says, "because the conductor might be standing around the stage in 'street' clothes. Typically after concerts, we are elusive figures dressed in tails who retire to the Green Room. This situation does not lead to extensive interaction with the public and is one reason why I have always enjoyed remaining in the hall after the open rehearsal specifically to interact with the public. I have been rewarded with excellent suggestions for future repertoire and future soloists."

"Rather than rue the calendar day marked 'Open Dress,' I look forward to what I know will be the most enjoyable rehearsal of the week." **S**

GREG WAXBERG is a writer and magazine editor for The Pingry School in Martinsville, New Jersey, a freelance writer covering the arts, and a program annotator for opera companies.

Got an opinion? Join the discussion!

Do open rehearsals offer something more (or less) than a typical concert experience? How does your orchestra benefit from open rehearsals?

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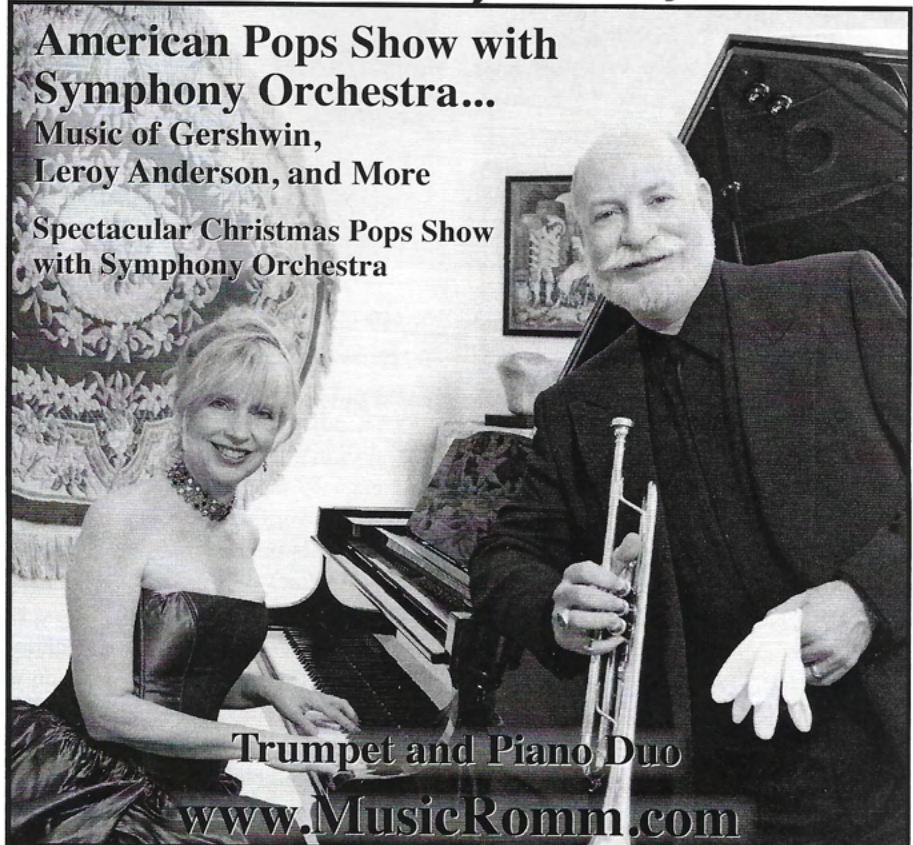
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