

‘You have a lot more tools at your disposal than you think,’ says cellist and Project STEP visitor Andres Sanchez

The New England Conservatory alum led a masterclass for young music students Saturday

By Arushi Jacob. Published October 22, 2024.

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Chances are good if you’re heading to Symphony Hall, it’s to hear a concert by the Boston Symphony Orchestra. But there’s a less public, more intimate series of rehearsals taking place each week in the basement through an afterschool program called Project STEP.

This past Saturday, the program hosted a masterclass for cello students, conducted by cellist and New England Conservatory alum Andres Sanchez.

When 14-year-old Sarah-Alysse Williams was asked to perform for the class, her answer was an emphatic “yes.” “This is going to help me play so much better,” she said, adding that Sanchez taught her how to project and play for an audience, not just herself.

“You have a lot more tools at your disposal than you think,” Sanchez told her in a critique.

“Andres understands the pathways of a musician of color, as someone who comes from a typically underrepresented group in classical music,” said Ian Saunders, STEP’s artistic director. “The students are always trying to understand, ‘What did it take for you to get there? How did you get there? What did you overcome?’”

Founded in 1982 by William Moyer, then orchestra personnel manager of the BSO, “Project STEP is a college and career pathway program for underrepresented communities for classical music,” said Josué González, the program’s executive director. STEP aims to “harness and develop talent” from Black and Latinx communities, among other underrepresented groups.

Designed for students K-12, the curriculum consists of three types of classes: private one-on-one lessons with instructors, chamber music classes, and large ensemble sessions (the latter two meeting weekly). The chamber music classes consist of two to six students forming an ensemble, while the large ensemble classes are modeled after an orchestra performance, collaborating with other programs including the New England Conservatory Preparatory School to increase the number of participants.

Project STEP also offers monthly masterclasses, where industry professionals like Sanchez are invited to teach students about their instruments and give them one-on-one instruction.

A Pennsylvania native, the Honduran-Venezuelan cellist has music in his DNA. Born to a professional viola player mother while she was still in school, Sanchez says that music has always been a “very natural part” of his life.

“She told me that when I was really, really little, I would stand up in the crib and watch her practice; and every time she would finish, I would start clapping,” recounted Sanchez.

Sanchez began playing when he was 4, with his mother teaching him how to play on what he describes as a “small viola with an end pin on it.” Taking a break when his mother became pregnant with his brother, Sanchez began playing again when he was 8½, this time studying under cellist Jesus Morales. He made his solo debut at Carnegie Hall at 13 and was accepted to the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia at 16, where he trained for seven years. From 2020 to this past spring, Sanchez trained with Paul Katz at the New England Conservatory.

A chance encounter in Mexico brought Sanchez back to Boston this past weekend. Sanchez met the conductor of Longwood Symphony, Jotaro Nakano, while playing a festival in Oaxaca this summer. Currently in a three-year partnership with Project STEP that began last September, the Longwood Symphony invited Sanchez to play at their orchestra concert last Saturday and to also teach a masterclass while he was in town.

Three advanced students were selected to perform for the cellist and the small audience consisting of family members, friends of STEP, and fellow students. The performers were each given a 20-minute time slot to play different sections of Camille Saint-Saëns’s “Cello Concerto No. 1 in A minor, Op. 33,” accompanied by pianist Joy Cline Phinney, a longtime STEP collaborator.

Each of Sanchez’s three sessions involved a good amount of back-and-forth as the students incorporated his suggestions into their playing and repeated sections of their prepared pieces. He often demonstrated on his own cello, calling out words of encouragement. Sofia Hernández-Williams, 11, paused her playing each time Sanchez exclaimed “good job” or “beautiful!”

Last in the lineup was 16-year-old Ameerah Manigat, who plans to pursue the cello and the pre-med track in college. Manigat was later joined by Williams and six other STEP students to perform alongside Sanchez and the Longwood Symphony Orchestra at Jordan Hall the same night.

“Visiting younger up-and-coming artists, it’s really gratifying to watch people in real time open their minds to different possibilities,” said Sanchez. “I hope I can be a small inspiration in helping people grow their imagination, personality, and ambition. That’s what I look forward to the most.”