

SYMPHONIC YOUTH

From a summer camp to two full orchestras, the exponential success of The Capitol Symphonic Youth Orchestras stems from passion and originality. —BAILEY LUCERO-CARTER



Cheri Collins, artistic music director and conductor for TCSYO

THE MUSIC ROOM at Lanier Middle School is filled with youthful voices and instrumental sounds that blare and bounce from every wall. Rehearsal for The Capitol Symphonic Youth Orchestras (TCSYO) is about to begin and the middle and high schoolers show no sign of quieting down. But as soon as Dr. Cheri Collins takes to the conductor's podium, they listen. And when she jokes, they laugh and smile.

The chemistry between Collins, artistic music director and conductor for the orchestras, and her students may explain why TCSYO has grown from a summer camp with less than 40 kids into two full orchestras in three short years.



The Capitol Symphonic Youth Orchestras (TCSYO)

With around 130 members enrolled this year and a new orchestra scheduled for next year, the future of TCSYO seems bigger and brighter than ever.

Students from Virginia, the District and Maryland travel the distance to be a part of the selective pre-professional orchestra. Their ages range from 10 to 18, and they come from public, private, and home-schools. But how did the program come to encompass such a wide range of members?

So much of the magic behind TCSYO comes from the energy and passion that Collins exudes. Her unique and engaging teaching methods advocate positive encouragement and fun. Specifically, Collins' method consists of two aspects: storytelling and physical exercises.

Collins' inspiration for her method stems from a former teacher, the musician Thomas Briccetti. "[H]e had the most amazing stories that capsulized what the music was supposed to be all about. He had a vision of also being able to share with students on their level something that they can relate to."

But Collins also tells her own stories. During rehearsal, when a student asked

why they had to sing, Collins told an anecdote: She was required to sing in the middle of her violin accompaniment for a ballet. It shed light on the significance on her method beyond a simple "because I told you to."

In addition to storytelling, Collins incorporates physical and visual exercises into her teachings, a method she pushed herself to develop while teaching a camp in São Paulo, Brazil. Collins breached the language barrier between her and the children by teaching without words.

"I would just throw myself into getting these kids involved physically with doing stuff—holding their instruments with no hands, working on the bow, coming up with all kinds of games and things for them to do." As a result, Collins received praise from the Brazilian conductor and composer Eleazar de Carvalho and she continues to use this method of teaching today.

Although TCSYO's high-rising success can be greatly attributed to Collins' boundless devotion to teaching and music, she insists that the orchestras flourish because of the students. "For the kids to take on the incentive on their own is to own it and to love it and to be part of it."

The exponential growth of TCSYO suggests that orchestral music is ever-alive in the digital age. As the program continues to expand each year, Collins has unwavering faith in the talent of her students. "[I]f you give it to them, they will learn it, they will play it, and they walk off stage with such pride that I have tears in my eyes." / tcsyo.org