

INTERMISSIONS

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER

2008

FEATURED INTERVIEW: ALLAN DENNIS

Founder and Director of Midwest Young Artists and Music Director of the Kankakee Valley Symphony Orchestra

Allan Dennis is founder and Executive Director of Midwest Young Artists, and also serves as Music Director of the Kankakee Valley Symphony Orchestra. Recipient of the Heidi Castleman Award for Excellence in Chamber Music Teaching from Chamber Music America, he received his doctorate with distinction from Indiana University at Bloomington, and his bachelor's and master's degrees from the State University of New York at Fredonia. In addition, he has studied at the Eastman School of Music and at the Royal Flemish Conservatory of Music in Antwerp, Belgium. He was chosen as both an Active Conductor at the Festival at Sandpoint and as a Fellow at the Conductors' Institute in South Carolina. During the summer of 1995, he participated in the conducting program at the Tanglewood Institute. His conducting teachers have included Gunther Schuller, Harold Farberman, and David Effron. Prior to founding Midwest Young Artists, he has held youth orchestra conducting positions with the American Suzuki Institute in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, North Shore Youth Orchestra, Northern Iowa Youth Orchestra, and conducted many all-state and festival orchestras as well. His professional conducting credits include associations with the Cedar Rapids Symphony, Acadiana Symphony, and Albany Symphony. University positions include the University of Evansville, University of Northern Iowa, University of Southwestern Louisiana, University of Wisconsin at Madison, and at Skidmore College. As well as conducting symphonic literature, he has conducted musicals, operas, and ballets. Allan Dennis has performed extensively both as soloist and as principal or co-principal bassist with the Albany Symphony, Cedar Rapids Symphony, and Madison Symphony. He has also conducted and/or performed with many popular artists including Bob Hope, Liberace, John Denver, and Red Skelton. Recently, he spoke with INTERMISSIONS.

INTERMISSIONS: How did Midwest Young Artists get started?

ALLAN DENNIS: We started in 1993 as there had been a group called the Skokie Valley Youth Symphony, which included students primarily from Skokie. They hadn't had much enrollment so the charter



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– STEVEN PALINCSAR

was being dissolved, so we took it over. I had been teaching in another institution on the North Shore. So we started as Skokie Valley Youth Orchestra, then in February 1993 we changed our name to better reflect where we were drawing students from. We had about 41 students back then and have since grown to have five orchestras, three jazz bands, seven jazz combos, three choirs, and over 60 chamber groups including strings, brass, woodwind, and percussion. We now have vocal chamber ensembles too, as well as a large music theory program. We have an early music program, and we recently did the world premiere of Max Raimi's Concertino for Flute, Strings, and Harp. So we're building a home with the power of music to enrich the lives of our students. We

2 promote an educational and socially supportive environment that is healthy personally and musically. Our focus is on our students as full persons. We work with students, parents, and teachers to create an environment where everyone is most productive musically. We try to support students by saying "Keep trying, keep going, we're here to help you develop and grow."

INTERMISSIONS: Would you talk a bit about how you were able to move into this wonderful facility?

AD: One of our board members came to me and said, "They're going to close Fort Sheridan, why don't you get a building there." So I did some research and found that when they close government facilities, they have to offer the facility to other

departments of the government, and you can apply to receive government property through the Department of the Interior or the Department of Education. So we looked at a building and applied. I wrote a grant application for the building and sent it in. While I was at Tanglewood that summer, my wife called and said, "You're not going to believe this, but you've got a building" for which we didn't have to pay anything to use. However, a developer wanted that property because it stood between two buildings he already owned. We didn't want to swap because this building was in terrible shape, but said we would if the developer would build out this building to *our* specifications. It came down to one week before we were going to get the other building and the developer hadn't done anything yet, and he was over a barrel, so he signed the contract. However, it took three years of time, including litigation against him, but then we finally got this building renovated to our specifications. We have no mortgage; we got the building renovated free, so it allows us to do wonderful things with our building.

INTERMISSIONS: Could you talk a bit about MYA's orchestra program?

AD: I'm really proud of our orchestras. Leonard Slatkin has guest conducted our orchestra. Menahem Pressler, Martin Beaver, William Preucil, and Mark O'Connor have appeared with the orchestra. The orchestra program includes one very large orchestra, which is our signature program, which boasts a huge string section with twenty violas,

twenty cellos. We do baroque instruments as well. The program is so large and so successful that we tour each year. We rotate between an international tour, a continental tour, and a local tour. We recently toured China and Korea for 21 days. That was a big tour! We toured Switzerland. We toured Budapest, Prague, and Vienna. We also toured Scotland twice. In the US, we've toured Banff, Montana, and Louisiana. Locally, we've toured to the University of Illinois Krannert Center and University of Wisconsin. Our next tour will be chosen from Stuttgart, Greece, or Argentina. Our students also frequently play in all-state orchestra and district festivals.

We try to create environments for our students to not just grow but for them to be special in their own court. We put students in orchestras geared to their own level on stages such as Pick-Staiger or the Civic Opera House. Quality is manifested in the kind of education every child gets, not just in the most advanced orchestra. So for us, we're about promoting quality in our Concert Orchestra, our Prep Orchestra, our Cadet Orchestra, and our Reading Orchestra, as well as all our other programs. We schedule sectionals and master classes for all of our students, not just the most advanced. We ask our older students to work with members in our younger orchestras. This helps the older students to feel good about helping to serve as a mentor, and the younger students to feel more encouraged and supported. We also have an age requirement that allows a younger student to play in a more advanced



One of many outstanding MYA ensembles.

orchestra but must still play in a more age-appropriate ensemble as well.

INTERMISSIONS: MYA has done remarkably well at the Fischhoff Chamber Music Competition.

AD: Yes, we've had twelve medal winners at Fischhoff in 14 years—not necessarily first place, but either first, second, or third. One fellow called us a "chamber music

factory". Of course, our purpose isn't to win the Fischhoff—our purpose is to promote chamber music—to get our students to realize the beauty and value of chamber music. Then if from that they learn to think of the competition as fun, that's not a real push for competitions—it's a push for learning chamber music. Last year, out of twenty-four groups, we had seven accepted and two on the waiting list. Fischhoff has strict criteria

for when you're accepted, so they'll accept students on a waiting list also. One year, we had a group on the waiting list which actually won the Fischhoff. One year we had thirteen groups enter Fischhoff, but again our goal is not to win competitions—that's a nice bonus—but our purpose is the promotion of the chamber music experience.

We try to support students by saying, 'Keep trying, keep going, we're here to help you.'
— Allan Dennis



INTERMISSIONS: You're now considering offering private lessons aren't you?

AD: Yes. Well, we do allow teachers to use our private studios for lessons, and the teachers have asked us to do their billing for them, so we're now leaning more in that direction. Any teacher who has a student in MYA can teach that student here for free. If a teacher has a student who is not at MYA,

then we charge a very small rental fee to the student. So we're trying to support teachers and help recruit students for teachers from schools here in our area. It's an effort to allow every teacher to be involved here at MYA if they want to.

INTERMISSIONS: Would you say a few words about your newest internet site, wmya.fm?

AD: We videotape almost all of our concerts at Civic Opera House, Pick-Staiger, Harris Theater, etc. Most are available on wmya.fm, our pod casting internet site which we started up two years ago. Almost everything from then on is on the site and can be downloaded for free. We have quartets, quintets, trios, orchestral performances, also jazz, choral, and more.

GO FOR BAROQUE

Learning to play baroque music in the style that modern scholars believe was prevalent during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has become less of a fad and more of a serious pursuit. In addition to purchasing a violin and bow constructed on the specifications of an original, baroque period instrument and bow, a number of publications are available to assist the student in learning to play in period style.

Baroque violinist Jaap Schroder, who has taught at Yale School of Music in recent years has written an excellent text on the performance of the J.S. Bach *Sonatas and Partitas for Violin Solo*. It includes practical information on bowing, phrasing, ornamentation, and tempos.

Second is the Judy Tarling *Baroque String Playing for Ingenious Learners*, which discusses both style and technique as well as tuning and pitch. *Ornamentation:*

A Question and Answer Manual by Valery Lloyd-Watts and Carole Bigler, contains a thorough discussion of ornamentation in the baroque, classical, romantic, and contemporary eras.

Two other interesting books, which are sometimes available, are Francesco Geminiani's *The Art of Playing on the Violin* which was written in 1751 and Leopold Mozart's *A Treatise on the Fundamental Principles of Violin Playing*. Both are published by Oxford University Press.

Also of interest to students is Georg Philipp Telemann's *Methodische Sonaten* (published by Baerenreiter) which contain two versions of the middle movements: one ornamented (by Telemann himself) and one not. These excellent sonatas provide the student with a wonderful opportunity to practice ornamentation under the guidance of a famed baroque composer.

IN CONVERSATION

STEVEN PALINCSAR ON VIOLIN TEACHING

QUESTION: At the 2008 American String Teachers Association National Conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico, you and a colleague, Margaret Pressley from Seattle, presented a program on "College/University/Conservatory Audition Preparation." Could you say a few words about auditions?

STEVEN PALINCSAR: I'd be glad to. Well, the first thing that might shock some students is that if they have waited until now to begin their preparation for this year's music school auditions, they have minimal chances for success. Audition preparation is more of a science than an art. Students need to do everything they can to maximize their chances of acceptance, and beginning their preparation as early as possible is the best thing they can do.

QUESTION: When do you begin to prepare your students to audition for schools such as Juilliard, Curtis, Eastman, or Northwestern?

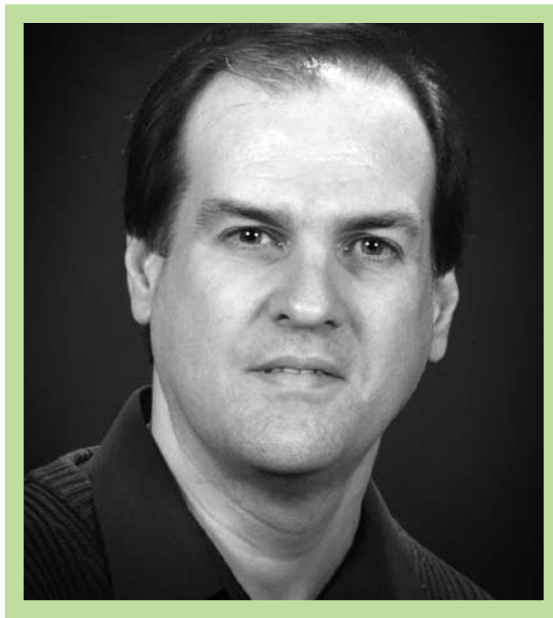
6 SP: From the very first lesson they have with me.

QUESTION: Are you serious?

SP: Absolutely. My job as a violin teacher is to bring my students to as near a professional level as possible by the time they walk into the audition, and to nurture and develop their love for music and the violin.

I begin by assessing their strengths and weaknesses, and work to nurture their strengths and to eliminate their weaknesses. In effect, I help them to convert their weaknesses into strengths. You know, in my opinion, there is no excuse for a student to play out of tune or out of rhythm at an audition. None. The tonal quality should be absolutely gorgeous, and the musicianship impeccable.

Furthermore, the student should be completely comfortable at the audition. No matter what unexpected events may occur, they must perform at their absolute peak.



Over the years that a student studies with me, I keep an eye out for pieces that the student has mastered that may later be performed at an audition. So, assuming the student goes to high school for four years, we will already have the entire audition repertoire selected and mastered by the beginning of the junior year. Then we work for the next year and a half to perfect the performance, and to master audition technique.

You see, at the audition, the student has an incredibly short time to demonstrate that she/he has what it takes to succeed at a school like Juilliard. At most *thirty* seconds. *Probably nearer to five or ten seconds!* The decision has already been made in that first impression. The rest of the audition is merely a confirmation of the audition committee's first impression. So if a student needs a few minutes to get it together, they're out of luck. And that's that.

QUESTION: So you prepare all your students for a career in music?

SP: Well, no, not really. The impetus for a life in music must come from the student. If they choose to go to the University of Illinois as a pre-med, that's up to them, but they will have the necessary preparation if they want

to put it to use.

QUESTION: What happens once a student decides they want to pursue a career in music?

SP: I sit down with the student and his/her parents, and we talk about what they will need to do.

QUESTION: Do you ever try to talk a student out of a career in music?

SP: Absolutely not. Not under any circumstances. Nor do I ever try to encourage a student to go into music as a profession. The decision must always be entirely theirs. Most students know pretty

much by about middle school or early high school what they want to do.

QUESTION: What do you do next?

SP: I give the student a hand-out that I prepared on how to research potential schools, and a research form for them to fill out.

QUESTION: What does it contain?

SP: Questions on repertoire, faculty, facilities, living accommodations, contact information, tuition, scholarship procedures, etc., etc. The student must do the research for each school they're thinking about, and bring me a completed form with all the information as soon as possible. I need to know about any specific repertoire requirements for example.

QUESTION: Do you encourage your students to apply to specific schools?

SP: Never. I am not an admissions counselor. The student must choose what schools to apply to. Then I assist the student in planning and preparing for the audition.

QUESTION: What if you believe the student has no chance of getting accepted to the school of their choice?

SP: It's my job to make sure the student is as prepared as he or she can possibly be, and to provide the student with my absolute faith, commitment, and support.

I will say this, however. If a student is set on a specific teacher, and that teacher has faculty positions at more than one school, I might recommend applying to the other schools as well, but that's as far as I will go.

For example, Dorothy DeLay taught at Juilliard, but also taught at the University of Cincinnati, so many kids could go study with her there. Victor Danchenko teaches at Curtis, which is out of reach for most kids, but he also teaches at Peabody, which for my students is not a stretch at all.

I also try if possible to get a student to study in the summer with a teacher that they may like so that they can connect together. Sometimes, a kid comes back after summer studies and says she doesn't want to study with that teacher anymore. It's rare, but it happens.

QUESTION: Once the repertoire is prepared, do you begin work on the audition itself?

SP: No. You see, my students play in a weekly studio class in addition to their private lessons, and I use the class to prepare kids for auditions, competitions, solo and chamber recitals, and concerts with orchestra. So really my kids have already had a number of years working on the audition itself, and have developed contingency plans to deal with almost every possible problem.

QUESTION: Could you talk a little about your studio class as it relates to auditions?

SP: Absolutely. Well, the first thing I try to do is to create an environment where students can be comfortable enough to perform for each other. In the beginning, I allow absolutely no criticism of a student's performance. Not by me, not by the kids, not by parents, not by guests, not by anyone. I insist that everyone applaud as the student gets up to perform. Sit quietly while they play. Then applaud after each performance. Next,

everyone in the room must pay the student a compliment. No criticism is permitted. No suggestions of something the student might work on. Just a compliment. One thing that they liked. I start each year this way, even if the kids all know each other and have studied this way a number of years.

We also work on how to accept a compliment even if completely undeserved in our opinion. Kids are taught to be gracious and polite, and to say something like "Thank you, I'm glad you enjoyed the performance."

When I judge that *each* student is ready for it, I ask for a couple of suggestions from the students for something that the performer might work to improve. I usually choose kids who are more advanced players to make the suggestions. Then we talk about these suggestions as a group to determine whether they are important or just interpretative. I never ask for more than three per class. At the private lesson, I can always add one more if needed.

If a student has a problem in the middle of the performance (for example a memory lapse), I work through it with them, and we develop a contingency plan. Something that the student can fall back on if someone drops a folding chair at the audition. We try to brainstorm everything that can possibly go wrong at the audition or performance. I teach the students never to stop the performance even if they are frustrated, angry, or about to cry. I tell them that it's quite likely at a performance only the performers know that anything was wrong. I remember that I had a friend who played what we both thought was a disastrous performance of a Mozart Concerto. Afterwards, members of the audience kept coming backstage to praise his playing over and over again. Even if the whole audience is full of musicians, we must never stop, and must never lose our cool.

During the year, we also talk about goal-setting, and how to break down a goal into bite-sized pieces. I normally do most of this for the student, but one of my goals is to teach each student how to become completely independent of me, in effect to

become their own teacher.

I frequently invite guests, prominent musicians, to whom I give evaluation forms similar to those used by audition committees. Guests turn the forms into me only, and do not share their comments with the student directly or the class. The comments are filtered through me, the teacher. You see, not every comment is helpful, and some are even destructive.

QUESTION: What happens once a student plays the audition?

SP: I insist that the student write a thank-you note to the jury, and then I help the student to move on to the next audition. If the student receives a rejection letter, I ask them to bring it to the lesson, and we talk about it together.

QUESTION: Do you ever try to contact the jury?

SP: Only if I am close friends with someone on the audition committee. Otherwise, never.

QUESTION: How many of your kids usually get accepted to Juilliard, Eastman, Indiana, or Curtis?

SP: It depends on so many factors. If Curtis for example only has room for two students, it's highly unlikely that a kid will get accepted there. Also, the character of an audition committee can (and does) change over time. I need to be up on what changes have occurred. Some schools no longer want to hear romantic concerti, but prefer only 20th century works (such as Bartok or Prokofiev). We need to network with faculty. We can't have an us vs. them attitude. As a violin teacher, I am providing a service not only to my students, but to the schools as well. So how many kids get accepted? They *all* do. In fact, every student I've ever prepared has gotten in at least somewhere. Cream always seems to rise to the top.

KNOW THE SCORE

Full scores for violin concertos available from Dover

Like the students of the late Dorothy DeLay, the students of the Steven Palincsar Violin Studio are used to studying not just the violin solo parts to violin concerti of the standard repertory, but also the full orchestral scores of each concerto. Most of the major violin concerti of the standard repertory are available from Dover Publications <www.doverpublications.com>. The major scores used are listed below.

J.S. BACH: The Three Violin Concerti

BEETHOVEN, MENDELSSOHN, AND TCHAIKOVSKY: Great Romantic Violin Concertos

BRAHMS: Complete Concerti

BRUCH: First Violin Concerto and Scottish Fantasy

DVORAK: Violin Concerto in A minor, Op. 53 and Romance for Violin and Orchestra in F minor, Op. 11

LALO: Symphonie Espagnole

MOZART: The Violin Concerti and Sinfonia Concertante, K. 364

PAGANINI'S Violin Concerto No. 1 in D major, Op. 6 and WIENIAWSKI'S Violin Concerto No. 2 in D minor, Op. 22

PROKOFIEV: Violin Concerto No. 1 in D major


SAINT-SAENS: Danse Macabre and Havanaise for Violin and Orchestra

SARASATE: Carmen Fantasy for Violin and Orchestra

SIBELIUS, ELGAR, AND GLAZOUNOV: Great Twentieth Century Violin Concertos

VIVALDI: L'estro Armonico, Op. 3

VIVALDI: The Four Seasons and Other Violin Concertos in Full Score: Op. 8 Complete



In spite of all human thoughts and theories, life is still a mystery, love is a mystery, music is a mystery. Both music and love blend with life as does color in a rainbow.

-Fritz Kreisler

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