

The students who make up this symphony orchestra are wired for music

Music connects children to their emotions and their spirit, teacher Theodora Stathopoulos says as FACE's orchestra celebrates 25 years.

Susan Schwartz • Montreal Gazette

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Agnes Liang is a soloist with the chamber music ensemble at FACE School, where she is in Grade 5, and a member of the school's symphony orchestra. PHOTO BY JOHN MAHONEY /Montreal Gazette

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Theodora Stathopoulos, a music teacher at Montreal's FACE School and the founding artistic director and conductor of its symphony orchestra, is positively lyrical when describing the benefits to her students of learning to play a musical instrument.

"First and foremost, there is the sheer joy of making music, of having a vehicle and being able to say something in a non-verbal way," said the longtime instrumental music teacher. "We are wired for music, and part of it is that music is so connected to our soul, to our minds, to our feelings.

"It is something I think the kids need, particularly as they go through adolescence, particularly during difficult times. It is a kind of spiritual connection to their own emotions and their spirit."

On a more practical level, she said, learning to play an instrument requires effort and discipline.

"Wanting to make that note, to make that instrument speak, forces you to stay in one place and really focus and really put your energy into making it happen. This is a skill that is transferable and durable: Once you acquire it, you have it for life."

The symphony orchestra founded by Stathopoulos, the Orchestre symphonique FACE (OSF), is marking its 25th anniversary — a milestone that was celebrated with a performance Feb. 1 in the main concert hall of Place des Arts, the Maison symphonique. It was a joyous event, with the 2,100-seat hall virtually sold out, much applause from a rapt audience of mostly family and friends and the unmistakable excitement of the talented young musicians on the stage. Spectacular.

FACE, an acronym for Fine Arts Core Education, is an arts-oriented elementary and high school offering instrumental and vocal music along with other artistic disciplines. The school has about 1,200 students and is run jointly by the Centre de services scolaire de Montréal (CSSDM) and the English Montreal School Board.

"Twenty-five years ago, there were 50 students from Grades 4 through 11 playing strings, but there was no orchestra with an identity," Stathopoulos recalled. "Each class was sort of like a small orchestra and, to do anything more, you would have to put a few classes together.

"In 1998, I decided I was going to try to have an orchestra. My vision was that we had to start somewhere like a youth orchestra, open to the community."



FACE students rehearsing for Feb. 1 concert at Maison symphonique. PHOTO BY JOHN MAHONEY /Montreal Gazette

That first year, most orchestra members were from outside: Only three of the string players were FACE students. One was Tina Zhang, today a violinist with the Houston Symphony Orchestra.

But within five years, “we had gone from 50 students to 300 in the string department,” recalled Stathopoulos — Mrs. S. to her students.

One reason she’d wanted to establish the orchestra was to ensure the future of the school’s string program. To have a symphony orchestra, she explained, a school needs “an instrumental music program that trains very high-calibre string as well as wind players.”

FACE is among a handful of schools on the island of Montreal with a string program and one of only two with a symphony orchestra. The other is Joseph-François-Perrault, a musically oriented CSSDM high school in St-Michel.

All FACE students begin to play an instrument in Grade 4. The instrumental music department has both wind and string departments but, because Stathopoulos is the lone full-time string teacher to three wind teachers, most students play wind instruments. Of her string students, she says: “I select them by level of technical ability, perseverance, motivation and interest.”

About half her students take private lessons, or have at some point, and she is a proponent of such lessons. To progress, she said, “you really need the one-to-one.”

Unlike wind instruments, one can begin string instruments early, said Stathopoulos, who started a Suzuki program at FACE for very young string players. The method aims to teach children to play music with the same ease with which they learn to speak their native language.

“I envisioned the Suzuki program starting in kindergarten, with these very young children,” she said. “By Grade 4 or 5, they would already have some technique.”

Developing technique takes time and “it is demotivating to be scratching away for three years,” she said. The school’s Suzuki program, sadly, was a casualty of the [COVID-19 pandemic](#).

The OSF is among several ensembles within the FACE music department. There is at least one wind ensemble for every grade level and, after founding the OSF, Stathopoulos started string ensembles, a junior and intermediate orchestra and, for high-school students, a senior orchestra.

All are feeder ensembles to the OSF, whose 106 members are the hardest working and technically most advanced of the young FACE musicians, Stathopoulos said. Although most are in high school, the orchestra “is open to elementary students as well if they are at an advanced level,” she said. “It caters to students by achievement, not by age or grade.”

The OSF string section has 68 violins, violas, cellos and basses; there are 38 instruments in the wind section, with flutes, clarinets, saxophones and trumpets among them, as well as percussion instruments. The students in the wind section belong to the school’s wind ensemble, Con Brio, directed by FACE instrumental music teacher Marie-Ève Arseneau.



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Con Brio opened the Feb. 1 program, with Arseneau conducting the ensemble in a performance of a work by Canadian conductor and composer Jonathan Dagenais, *Symbiopholie!* The senior orchestra performed, as did the intermediate and junior orchestras.

FACE CSSDM principal Stéphane Abran conducted the OSF in the second movement of Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 7*, the *Allegretto*. A former music teacher himself, Abran is “passionate about our program,” Stathopoulos said.

The FACE chamber orchestra played the first movement of Vivaldi's Concerto for Four Violins in B minor, the Allegro. Soloists Kevin Chen, 12; Jun Cho, 12; Elsa Kuerti, 10; and Agnes Liang, also 10, all members of the OSF, performed with talent and poise.

All four say they prefer performing to practising, with its scales, exercises and repetitive nature. During a performance, "you're not just repeating," said Grade 7 student Cho, who has been playing since he was 4. "I'm a bit nervous, but only a bit, because I like performing."

Liang, who is in Grade 5 and has been playing since she was 7, said, "I feel like I do better when I'm playing in front of people. I don't really have stage fright."

Chen, a Grade 6 student who started to play at age 5, said he finds great pleasure in playing and learning and in the teamwork of being part of an orchestra.

For Kuerti, a Grade 5 student who was 6 when she began to play, being part of an orchestra "is fun and you get to see your friends, the teachers are really great — and I like to hear the music."

Said Stathopoulos: "These kids work *very* hard. They practise a *lot*."

"You have to find a way to motivate everyone in your ensemble. For some, it is motivating to be playing in a fancy place like Place des Arts; for others, it is playing something challenging."

Over the years, the OSF has performed more than 100 concerts at venues including Place des Arts, Notre-Dame Basilica of Montreal and the school auditorium. In 2005, it earned the Christopher Gledhill Award for Best Amateur Symphony Orchestra in Canada from the Canadian Music Educators' Association. Stathopoulos received the Prime Minister's Award for Teaching Excellence in 2006.

Among former OSF members who have gone on to successful musical careers are Stéphane Tétreault, a virtuoso cellist; Richard Zheng, a violinist with the Orchestre symphonique de Montréal (OSM); double bassist Brandyn Lewis, who plays regularly with the OSM, and Boson Mo and Zhang, both violinists with the Houston Symphony.

Some former students with whom Stathopoulos remains in touch have been back to play concertos with school orchestras and have told her how playing with the OSF motivated them.



Ten-year-old violinist Elsa Kuerti is a soloist with the chamber music ensemble at FACE School, where she is in Grade 5, and a member of the school's symphony orchestra. PHOTO BY JOHN MAHONEY /Montreal Gazette

“In their formative years, they could see the beauty and that fuelled their desire so that they endured the competition and rigorous training,” she said.

As Mo told The Gazette: “The atmosphere of playing among professionals, playing full-scale repertoire, combined with the high artistic vision of Madame Stathopoulos, is what makes the OSF stand out — not just in Montreal or Canada, but anywhere in the world.

“I feel so lucky to have been a part of the OSF during the five years of my high school education.”

Tétreault, who was in the orchestra from 2003 to 2007, said in a testimonial that it was in the OSF “where I first discovered my passion for music.”

OSM violinist Zheng said the “OSF taught me leadership and was enrichment for the future.”

Stathopoulos has taught at FACE since 1992, although she has been a teacher for 45 years. When her children were young, she spent about a decade teaching privately and leading lunchtime and after-school programs.

A clarinetist by training, she studied strings and violin throughout university. “I was always passionate about the strings, even though I never learned to play a string instrument: I always wished I had.”

She completed her Suzuki certification in 1979 because she was interested in teaching very young children. Both her children play string instruments, as do her grandchildren.

When Stathopoulos started the OSF, it was on her own time. Now she has assistance from a few part-time teachers. Kerry Roebuck and Pablo Seib, who are on contract for the senior orchestra, conducted the orchestra during the the Feb. 1 concert.

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She conducted a number of works during the concert, including the final piece — Aram Khachaturian’s music from the ballet Gayane — and earned a standing ovation.

In her note in the concert brochure, Stathopoulos expressed gratitude for support she has had from FACE administrators, colleagues, parents and, most notably, OSF members.

“For many of them, the symphonic experience is an intense process in which alertness, self-expression and insight into the musical performance come together,” she wrote. “They are the reason behind my commitment and I am thankful for having them in my life.”



The Orchestre symphonique FACE rehearses for its Feb. 1 concert at the Maison symphonique. PHOTO BY JOHN MAHONEY /Montreal Gazette

AT A GLANCE

The Orchestre symphonique FACE will give a concert open to the public at the Maison symphonique of Place des Arts on May 3, starting at 5 p.m., with the symphony orchestra of École secondaire Joseph-François-Perrault and the string orchestra of École St-Luc, a CSSDM high school.

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