

Orchestra conquers Carnegie

By ERIC BARTELS
The Tribune

The oldest youth orchestra in the nation now knows firsthand how to get to New York's Carnegie Hall; practice, practice, practice. The 93-member Portland Youth Philharmonic Orchestra did just that and then sparkled in a June visit to one of the world's most venerated music venues.

"We had some audience members that were in tears after the first piece," says Music Director Mei-Ann Chen. "It was the New York subscribers that gave us a standing ovation. They really appreciated what we brought to New York."

Chen is appreciating what the Carnegie Hall stop, part of an intensive East Coast tour, did for the philharmonic, which consists of more than 200 young musicians between the ages of 8 and 22.

"There's nothing compared to a tour experience for an orchestra," Chen says. "They not only enjoyed being with one another, they really built a great team. They were able to achieve and improve at a much faster pace. Some of them actually surpassed

what they could do individually. They learned how to work with each other."

Each season presents Chen, in her third year at the philharmonic, with the unenviable task of rebuilding an orchestra that loses roughly half its number to graduation. Students rotate up from the second orchestra, called the Portland Youth Conservatory Orchestra, and the smaller Young String Ensemble, kids ages 8 to 13.

"The hard part of my job is trying to look ahead and trying to build the orchestra," Chen says.

But the 31-year-old Taiwan native says the challenge is offset somewhat this season by the power of the Carnegie Hall experience over her remaining charges.

"They realized they could improve from zero to 10 in one day," she says. "They have so much confidence, being able to play in such a prestigious hall."

Using lesser-known works, Chen has a goal this season to put flesh on the bones she assembled last year by testing the orchestra with a challenging "hard-core" repertoire such as Igor Stravinsky's "Firebird Suite."

"My part was to see how much I could push them. I wanted to see how far they could go," she says. "This year, I have confidence that we're stretching in a very different way."

The orchestra's "Fall Concert: A Journey in Time," on Nov. 13 at the Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall, features works of Claude Debussy and 20th century French composer Francis Poulenc as well as a piece by Russian Modest Mussorgsky that was orchestrated by Frenchman Maurice Ravel.

"Any French composer — think of perfume — they paint with sound," Chen says. "That is an important lesson for our kids. The first program is full of color."

Students Judy Park, 16, and Jessica Shim, 15, will reprise Poulenc's Concerto for Two Pianos, which won them the philharmonic's Bi-Annual Piano Concerto Competition in March.

"To see two pianos facing each other on opposite sides, it's more of a chamber music approach," Chen says. "It's like synchronized diving. The two of them have to develop the exact feeling for everything."

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Robert Langslet, 16, a percussionist in the Portland Youth Philharmonic Orchestra, gives a favorable review to a recent performance.