

Phila. Youth Orchestra Plays With Heart BY PETE MARINO

Times have changed! When I first began with the Brass Band more than 15 years ago, we had more than 50 members. We may not have been very good musically back then, but we were always loud! We had spirit but lacked true musical polish. Now there are days when we may spend the bulk of a rehearsal reviewing how to play a B flat scale. We have returned to the building stages in some ways, but in other ways we have progressed beyond my highest expectations.

Our musical group, the Philadelphia Youth Orchestra, is composed of both young men and young women ranging in age from 10 to 20 years. This does not include the more “mature” members who are beginning to act more as advisors than performers. On any given Saturday morning, the rehearsal consists of anywhere from two to 20 members. Some have their own instruments, while some have been known to show up with one drum stick and a gongyo book.

After the “big change” in 1990, we, like others, floundered in frustration for a long time trying to reorganize and move forward. The former Brass Band and Fife and Drum Corps joined forces to make this the first activity group in Philadelphia to be made up of both young men and young women.

Most practices began with slow gongyo, since many were seriously attempting to do gongyo for the first time. Finding playable instruments was a challenge for a number of members — and playing music was even more of a challenge. There were no standard arrangements for a flute, a guitar, a violin, two trumpets and three drummers! So all music had to be rewritten by the group.

We began by performing for some world peace gongyo meetings, with great support and encouragement from our wonderful members. But before every performance, we could not predict the outcome!

We did struggle during those first years. And the struggle continues, but with some very significant differences. Everyone either has, or is in the process of buying his or her instrument. The types of music we are playing have become more sophisticated. The spirit of the group is one of cooperation and friendship.

And one of our most significant advancements is that nearly every member of the youth orchestra cannot only recite but also lead gongyo!

Recently, we gave leadership positions to a number of the younger members and are passing the mantle of leadership to them.

I am so encouraged to see these young people develop into the leaders who will take our organization well into the 21st century. After years of practice, I am beginning to see how perseverance and genuine caring for others can help accomplish kosen-rufu in the world.

On a recent Saturday, some of the youth orchestra members wrote their determinations for the group:

“For the complete unity of the group. For growth and development musically and in faith. For the group to play with feeling, heart and passion for kosen-rufu! Also for chanting sessions. For our ability to enrich people’s lives and inspire with our music.” —
Starr Cullars

“I’m here to make a difference.”

— *Anthony Thomas*

“My determination for the Youth Orchestra is for each of us to encourage the members each time we play.” — *James Schwartz*

“My determination is to establish unity with the other Youth Orchestra members and leaders and to base everything on daimoku.” — *Eve Greenspan*

“I’m here to play my best.”

— *Alex Kihurani*

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