

YO Alumni Profiles

There are now more than 1,000 alumni of the San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra. Below are personal recollections of the SFSYO from just a few of the many alumni who have continued on to careers performing with professional orchestras:

[Juliana Athayde](#), Concertmaster, Rochester Philharmonic
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Juliana Athayde, Concertmaster, Rochester Philharmonic

“The SFSYO was one of the most influential parts of my young adult life. My first YO concert had me sitting in the middle of the first violin section – at only 12 years old! – playing Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. Imagine the fear of a seventh grader playing Stravinsky for the first time! My most beloved memory of all YO performances would have to be Strauss' *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. To perform that piece and those violin solos in Davies Hall to a full house (including MTT!) was an experience I'll never forget. To have that performance preserved as a live recording is amazing. Looking up and seeing Alasdair on the podium over the years was always invigorating, inspiring, and comforting as we matured through our music making.

“I literally grew up in the YO. From my first lesson with Zoya Leybin when I was just 11 years old to my last concert with the YO in Europe as Concertmaster at age 17, the San Francisco Symphony family was my musical (and more specifically orchestral) tutelage away from home (a family full of successful musicians!). Whether it was sectionals with Zoya (she made us work hard and boy, are we thankful for that tough love!), rehearsals with Alasdair, intensive rehearsal weekends, attending SFS concerts

after Saturday afternoon rehearsals (thanks to the free tickets available for YO kids), or the thrill of performing at Davies and abroad, I have cherished my YO memories and taken them with me throughout my life.

“It was because of my three years of experience as Concertmaster in the YO that I decided I wanted to make that my life path. Thanks to the YO, I went to college with a clear image of where I wanted my career to be in ten years. I am truly living the dream as Concertmaster of the Rochester Philharmonic, and Zoya Leybin and Alasdair Neale are largely to thank.”

Demian Austin, Principal Trombone, Metropolitan Opera Orchestra

“My mother worked at the San Francisco Symphony when I auditioned for the Youth Orchestra. I’d never been in an orchestra before – the closest I’d come to the experience was having a few string players join my high school band in the pit of a musical! I remembering not practicing much at the time I was admitted to the YO – things just came naturally to me. It was only when my teacher Don Kennelly (trombonist, then and now, with the San Francisco Opera) and Leif Bjaland, the YO music director, said to me, “You know, you really should pursue this”, that I started to take the trombone seriously. I vividly remember performing the Saint-Saens “Organ” Symphony, Martinu’s Symphony No. 5 and Barber’s *Music for a Scene from Shelley* with the YO. What really sticks with me, though, is the chance I had to play a solo alongside Symphony musicians in a “Side by Side” concert. In Rimsky-Korsakov’s Russian Easter Overture, the second trombone has a chant-like solo over a choir of low strings that I later discovered on a lot of audition lists for schools and orchestras. It is an amazing musical moment and I was able to experience it on the stage of Davies Symphony Hall. John Engelkes’ encouragement and compliments after that concert meant a lot to me as well. [Engelkes has been the Symphony’s Bass Trombonist since 1981.]

“After YO, I studied at Oberlin, Mannes, and Juilliard, and then won the audition for Principal Trombone of the Metropolitan during my second year at Juilliard. I’ve now been playing with the Opera for 13 seasons. Ironically, but predictably, I now practice all the time! When I can find the time, I also pursue my passion for writing, particularly screenplays. I know other full-time musicians who have spent significant time on screenplay writing – creativity often has many outlets.

“I have always deeply loved music and played piano from the age of five. When I started playing trombone it was just for fun. The encouragement I received, from the time I started in junior high at Hoover until I left San Francisco for college, was crucial. I mean, listening to Wagner on my Walkman in high school wasn’t exactly a path to instant popularity. And so, especially important was the YO experience, which I realized later in life had made a huge impression on me. It was my first audition (and also my second! Ahem! Two tries...), my first orchestral experience, and the first time I’d played serious music for so many people. By playing major works of orchestral music at so young an age, I was able get a sense of what kind of future I might be in for and whether or not I could cut it or even *enjoy* it! It was a truly enriching experience that has

stayed with me my whole life, and definitely helped prepare me for my career and point me in the right direction.”

Gillian Benet-Sella, Harpist, Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra

“I was in the first season with Maestro Jahja Ling. I remember being very impressed with the professionalism of the organization right from the start. It was a pleasure to have an association with Doug Rioth, the Principal Harpist of the San Francisco Symphony as well. I recall playing Debussy's Petite Suite as well as working on Stravinsky's *Firebird* Suite. Strangely, even though I have been a professional for many years already (11 as Principal Harp in the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, 1½ as Principal Harp of the Israel Philharmonic and a season as Principal of the Kennedy Center Opera Orchestra), I have not had the chance to perform the Debussy Petite Suite again. I remember being very excited about the beautiful harp and flute solo that I learned for the concert.

“I really enjoyed working with Maestro Ling and was happy to meet up with him again at performances with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. Another memory that I have is of a concert where Isaac Stern attended (or perhaps even played). There wasn't harp in the concert but I attended it anyway and I had the honor of giving Mr. Stern a cookie jar that was shaped like Davies Symphony Hall. I remember walking on the stage after the concert and concentrating hard to make sure that I didn't drop it while I shook his hand.”

Tad Calcara, Principal Clarinetist, Utah Symphony

“I'll never forget that late summer day in September 1991 when I attended my first SFSYO rehearsal. It was a real honor to walk into Davies Symphony Hall and sit in my teacher's chair (David Breeden). My time with the YO was my first meaningful experience of playing principal. It was an addicting place to be in the heart of the orchestra surrounded by these great woodwind, brass and strings players. When Alasdair Neale raised his arms for the dark opening of Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony, the sound resonated on the stage and through the big hall. I knew from that moment that this was a very special place to be each Saturday. It made a profound impact on me as I was perfecting my skills as a musician. I am forever grateful for the wonderful treasure the YO was for me. Thanks to generous donors, this special experience will be possible for future generations of musicians. Congratulations on your first 25 years, and best wishes on the next 25!”

Charles Chandler, Bassist, San Francisco Symphony

“I knew I wanted to play the bass professionally when I joined the YO as a senior in high school. Still, YO had a huge impact on my career – it cemented what I wanted to do with my life. We were treated like professionals. We had a lot of responsibility, but we were also given a lot of respect. We even played for Queen Elizabeth II when she visited San Francisco! Being around other young musicians who were so enthusiastic was another great part of the experience. And of course, Steve Tramontozzi, the coach for the section,

brought so much experience and ‘insider perspective’ to his work with us, which was fantastic. My younger brother Corey was also a member of the YO in the 1990’s under Alasdair Neale, so we both got the chance to work with Steve!

“When I was very young, I saw Michael Burr [former Principal Bassist of the SFS], perform chamber music with my mother, a flutist. I knew then that the bass was the instrument I wanted to play, and I held on to my wish until I was big enough to learn to play it. But what really got me going was studying with my teacher Shinji Eshima, and playing in a bass Master Class with David Walter, a teacher at Juilliard. David was very complimentary of my playing and told me I should come to study with him in New York. From that day, I practiced like crazy!

“After I received my degree from Juilliard, I went on to play Assistant Principal and then Associate Principal Bass with the Phoenix Symphony. Fortunately, I had a good, healthy German bass at the time, so it fared pretty well in the dry climate. In 1992, I took the audition in San Francisco. Winning the audition meant joining Michael Burr and Steve Tramontozzi as a professional on the stage of Davies Symphony Hall, where I’ve played for the last 14 seasons. During last week’s concerts, coincidentally, I shared a stand with Jon Keigwin, another YO alum. I’m definitely happy to be back in the Bay Area. A musician has to go where the opportunity is, but I feel very lucky to be back playing in Davies Hall, the place that inspired me to pursue music professionally.”

Annie Chang Center, Assistant Principal Violist, Phoenix Symphony

“When I joined the YO in eighth grade, I had never had the experience of playing in a good orchestra before. YO enhanced my musicianship, particularly by broadening my focus to include orchestral repertoire in addition to the solo repertoire students tend to concentrate on with their private teachers. I still feel a deep personal connection with the pieces I learned in YO – particularly those that we took on tour to Europe in 1986.

“There are so many memories from that tour, which was my first time in Europe. We took Beethoven’s Symphony No. 5, Bartók’s Concerto for Orchestra, and Wagner’s Overture to *Die Meistersinger*. Playing in the Vienna Opera House was a thrill, and we heard the Hungarian orchestra play in Budapest the day before we played Bartók for a Hungarian audience! I also remember what a great musician David Milnes was and is – he was very caring, and talked so much about the musical meaning of each piece. He was a really effective communicator with us – he made everyone want to work hard for him!

“My late sister Lucy Chang played the flute in the Youth Orchestra during the same time I was there. Our wonderful memories of the first European trip with the Youth Orchestra were something we cherished together. At twenty-eight, she became a young professor at the Peabody Conservatory and played principal flute at the Key West Symphony in Florida. A year later, she was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer. She fought very hard for two and half years. Eventually, the disease took her life in 2002.

“When I was young, I was more of a pianist than a violist. In fact, while I was in YO, I played Mendelssohn’s Piano Concerto in G Minor with the orchestra under Leif Bjaland, and later played with Herbert Blomstedt and the SFS as soloist in Rachmaninoff’s Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini. It was fairly clear to me when I joined the orchestra that music would be a primary focus in my life, but I still had major choices to make (piano vs. viola, orchestral playing vs. chamber music). I went to Peabody Conservatory for my undergraduate studies, then returned to San Francisco for two years to pursue a graduate degree in chamber music.

“I was dating a cellist at the time, and two auditions came up for the Phoenix symphony – on consecutive days, no less. One was for cello, the other for viola. We took the auditions, and won the jobs! We’re now married, and have been in Phoenix for 12 seasons together. Two years after beginning as a section player, I moved up to become Assistant Principal, and was very grateful for the experience I had gained in leading a section while serving as Principal in YO.

“Two summers ago, I played again with Leif Bjaland at the Music in the Mountains Festival in Durango, Colorado. I always appreciated his elegance and style as a conductor, and it was refreshing to work with him as an adult. I also worked briefly with David Milnes when he came to Phoenix for an audition, and again, I enjoyed the different perspective I had as a professional this time around.”

Monica Daniel-Barker, Principal Flutist, Oakland-East Bay and Modesto Symphonies

“The SFSYO experience solidified for me the idea that a musical career was what I needed to do with my life. Being able to collaborate with other people with the same passions at that age was indeed a privileged experience and working with such a carefully manicured and professional structure such as is the philosophy of the YO inspired the musicians to always achieve something at the top of their abilities and beyond. For me, performing Mahler’s First Symphony with Alasdair Neale is an experience I will never forget. That was an introduction into the symphonic world so rich and intense for me that whenever I am lucky enough to perform Mahler now, I always have fond recollections of that seminal experience with his work.

“Without having been in the YO, I don't think I would've realized just how intensely satisfying a performing career could be. I knew I enjoyed playing in orchestra before that, but the YO was on such a greater level than my prior experiences that it inspired a sense of drive in me to really dedicate myself to music in a more profound way. And of course, it opened my eyes to what competition in the music field would be more like down the road...

“One of the main experiences with the YO was the European tour in 1992. To this day I absolutely love traveling internationally, and I think getting this experience with the YO while I was in high school has made me eager and appreciative of going overseas and learning more about the people and artistic cultures of other countries. It still is amazing to me that they have an appreciation of art and music over in Europe on such a different

level than here in the states, and I believe as the music industry continues to morph, this is something essential for musicians to try to understand so that we might become more successful in bringing art and music more into the everyday lives of our own culture. I think the YO's tours to other countries is one of the most valuable "gifts" it can give to future generations of musicians so that their awareness can be piqued as well.

Cathryn Down, Violinist, San Francisco Symphony

“I had a vision of where I wanted to be from a very young age. I still have creative writing papers from grade school that say, ‘I want to be in the San Francisco Symphony’. Growing up in San Jose, I started violin with the Suzuki Method when I was five, but abandoned it for five years in middle school and most of high school – frankly, I burned out. The only reason I started back in orchestra in high school was because I needed another credit class. However, I soon set my heart on being a member of the SFSYO – I don’t think I’d ever practiced as hard as I did for the YO audition! When I was accepted, I didn’t realize how pivotal the experience was to be in my life, particularly the coachings I received from [YO Violin Coaches] Jorja Fleezanis and Zoya Leybin. In a year, I’d decided to transfer out of Santa Clara University, where I’d won a scholarship to study music but was now pursuing business studies, and into the San Francisco Conservatory.

“After completing my bachelor’s and master’s degrees with Zaven Melikian, I moved to Europe, where I played in various orchestras, including the National Orchestra of Belgium for three years, before returning to the Bay Area to take auditions for the Opera Orchestra and the San Francisco Symphony. I played as a substitute in the SFS for seven years. I must say, it’s sometimes hard to find the time and motivation to prepare for an audition when you are playing full time in the orchestra you want to get into! Still I took several SFS auditions whenever they came up. Each time I didn’t win an audition, I told myself ‘OK, you didn’t get it. There’s something you need to do differently next time.’ I did eventually win the audition, and now play in the orchestra I dreamed of belonging to as a child.”

Timothy Genis, Principal Timpanist, Boston Symphony Orchestra

“I took part in two important ‘firsts’ for the San Francisco Symphony. As a member of the San Francisco Boys’ Chorus, I participated in the performances of Mahler’s Eighth Symphony that opened Davies Hall in 1981. I was also a member of the YO during its very first seasons. I discovered percussion while in the YO. I had no clue what I was doing when I started – I had never had a drum lesson, and didn’t know any percussion terms. I was a pianist by training. There were times I went home so frustrated after rehearsal, ready to quit because I hadn’t managed to grasp some percussion concept or technique. Still, YO Music Director Jahja Ling, and the Percussion Coaches, Barry Jekowski and Raymond Froehlich, were very supportive and encouraging. I remember learning something every rehearsal. Sectional was a huge part of the learning -- having a professional musician show you how to play, in addition to the conductor making suggestions. Jahja personally helped me prepare my audition pieces for conservatories, which I practiced at Davies Hall sometimes for eleven hours a day. He’d stop by while I

was practicing, listen for a while, then give me valuable feedback on how to improve my playing of the pieces. He showed me a whole new level of music-making, beyond getting the notes and rhythms right.

“After beginning at Eastman, I won jobs in Hong Kong and Honolulu before moving to Boston to start as Assistant Timpanist, going on to win Principal Timpanist. I’ve been in the BSO for fifteen years, and am married to the Orchestra’s Assistant Principal Violist. Our ten month-old daughter has already shown great promise on the snare drum!

“From the very beginning, the YO seemed like a big part of the Symphony. The level of playing was so unbelievably high.”

David Jones, Principal Clarinetist, Kennedy Center Opera House Orchestra

“It is a great pleasure to share a few thoughts about my time as a member of the YO from 1981-1984. I was honored and excited having been chosen to rehearse and perform in the newly opened Davies Symphony Hall. I knew that this was going to be a big deal on our first day with a tour of this beautiful hall and an introduction to our YO Manager whose only job, it seemed, was to treat us youngsters as professionals. It seemed to me that the only difference between the YO and the San Francisco Symphony itself was a paycheck. But none of us cared about that. We wanted to make music. The sound that this collection of young musicians made under the Direction of the fine conductor Jahja Ling in this beautiful hall was thrilling. I experienced goosebumps for the first time being part of a performance of Beethoven’s *Eroica* Symphony, which opened my eyes and ears to the possibilities of what creating great symphonic music could be. Being a member of the YO during the first few years of its existence provided me with valuable guidance from David Breeden and Donald Carroll as coaches from the Symphony clarinet section, as well as a peer group of talented friends and colleagues who shared my love for orchestral music. As I reflect upon my early years, I remember always wanting to have a life in music, but being a part of the YO program helped me realize I *had* to have a life in music.”

Cathy Lum-Peterson, Flutist, Colorado Symphony.

“I look back at my time in SFSYO under Alasdair Neale as one of the most amazing periods of my life. It was a spectacular opportunity, both musically and personally. I made friendships that continue even today. Being in such a high-quality musical environment as a teenager was inspiring and gave me a good start toward pursuing music as a career. I particularly remember our performances in the Amsterdam Concertgebouw and the Leipzig Gewandhaus. A few years ago we had Alasdair here in Colorado to conduct, and one of the images that kept popping into my head during our rehearsal was the picture of him on tour in his SPAM t-shirt - navy blue with yellow letters.

“One of the most valuable lessons I learned from the YO was the concept of being a professional, no matter what age I was. We were treated with respect as musicians, and it always stuck with me. I was amazed through college and my free-lancing years how

poorly young musicians are sometimes treated. I am grateful to the YO for the opportunities they provided for me and congratulate them on their 25th Anniversary!”

Matthew Muckey, Trumpeter, New York Philharmonic

“When I joined the SFSYO in 11th grade, I knew I had a talent for the trumpet, but I had no idea I wanted to pursue music for my career. Six years later, I turned 22 on the day of my first rehearsal as a trumpeter with the New York Philharmonic! Today the orchestra is playing in Costa Mesa, and tomorrow we fly to Japan on tour.

“YO was an extremely nurturing, positive experience for me. I met so many intelligent and kind people, and formed lasting friendships. Alasdair Neale was a wonderful person to work with, and a very classy character. I remember that he already knew my name on the day of my first rehearsal. I also worked with Edwin Outwater during his first season as Music Director, and his encouragement on and off the podium really boosted my confidence in college and beyond. After I left YO to attend Northwestern, Edwin would often stop by for a visit when he was in the area, just to check up on me and see how things were going.

“I have great memories of the 2001 tour to Lithuania, Russia, and Ireland. We took Tchaikovsky’s Fifth Symphony to his native country, playing in amazing venues like the Mariinsky Theater. I remember the banners announcing our concerts were up all over town when we arrived, and that made me feel part of something very special. I also remember a performance of Copeland’s *Appalachian Spring* in a church in Lithuania where a flock of birds had perched in the rafters. The end of the piece is very quiet, and as the last notes of the piece faded, they took that opportunity to fly away themselves. Alasdair was so focused on the music, that I don’t think he even noticed it. Somehow, it seemed a very fitting ending to the piece.

“I know many young musicians struggle with the decision to pursue music professionally. In college, I did very little but practice, and sacrificed a lot to be able to play at a world-class level. My advice for anyone trying to make it in this business is to take every audition you can – there are no age boundaries in music. You stand the same chance on the day of the audition as any musician of any age, but you also have to play better than all of them in order to win! It’s also important never to lose enthusiasm for playing, in the event that playing becomes your career. I have always played duets with as many friends as possible (and as many different instruments as possible), to take a break from practicing excerpts. When I advanced to the finals of the New York Philharmonic audition, I was thrilled to learn that I’d be playing duets with Phil Smith, the Principal Trumpeter, as part of the audition! Here I was, playing next to one of my longtime idols, with the prospect of playing next to him on a more permanent basis, and I already knew the repertoire we were reading from all those years of duets with friends.

“Life in New York is great, but expensive. The rent for my small one-bedroom is four times that of the apartment I lived in when I was at Northwestern. Fortunately, I had spent time in San Francisco, so I was already familiar with expensive cities! Indeed, the

fact that there was no tuition to be in the SFSYO was an amazing feature. Thanks to YO, I enjoyed the incredible feeling of playing on Davies Stage – for free! On top of the chance to play in one of the best halls in the world, we were coached by world-class musicians – Craig Morris, Glenn Fischthal, and Jeff Biancalana all worked with our trumpet section – and given the finest pre-professional experience possible.”

Philip Munds, Principal French Horn, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra

“Being in the Youth Orchestra was my introduction to the whole culture of music and musicians in San Francisco. It was there I first worked with Arthur Krehbiel, then Principal Horn of the San Francisco Symphony and Coach to the Youth Orchestra. I later went on to be his student at the San Francisco Conservatory, sometimes playing Assistant Principal next to him as a sub for the Symphony.

“After freelancing for a while out of school, I got hired to play with the Air Force Band – I wanted the steady income, as well as the intense professional experience, that it offered. While working in Washington, I studied with a player from the Baltimore Symphony. When the Assistant Principal audition for that orchestra came up, I took it and won. When the Associate Principal had to step down for a year because of an injury, Yuri Temirkanov [then Music Director of the BSO] asked me to step up. More injuries in the section, and I found myself playing Principal Horn on Mahler’s Fifth Symphony when the orchestra was playing in Carnegie Hall! I was asked to try out Principal for a year (in the BSO, a committee of nine players can award probationary tenure to a musician), and I was offered my current position.

“My father had been a professional horn player in the Navy Band, and I always knew I’d play the horn as well. However, it was a very gradual process by which I came to realize that I’d take music as seriously as he did. Part of that process were the musical experiences I had while I was in the YO – Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony and Kodály’s *Háry János* Suite with Jahja Ling, and Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony with David Milnes. I particularly remember playing Principal Horn on Mahler’s First Symphony with Jahja Ling. After the concert he gave me a huge hug and congratulated me on the job I’d done.”

Meeka Quan-DiLorenzo, Associate Principal Cellist, Utah Symphony.

“I didn’t know when I joined the YO that I wanted to play professionally. After one year in the group, I had decided that this was my life. I left the YO at sixteen to enter the Young Artists’ Program at the Cleveland Institute of Music. The YO was one of the best experiences that a young person could have. It was the highlight of my week – rehearsal was all I could think about. I particularly remember the experiences I had on the 1998 tour. We played in amazing halls with amazing leadership from the podium – I haven’t been on a better tour since. The relationship that Alasdair Neale had with the orchestra was incredible. I continue to work with him as an adult at the Sun Valley Music Festival in Idaho. He still knows exactly what to say to get the best out of you, whether you are a student musician or an adult professional.”

Christina Smith, Principal Flutist, Atlanta Symphony

“I always knew that I would do something in music for my career, but it wasn't until my first rehearsal with the SFSYO in September of 1985 that my dream was directed towards playing in a great orchestra professionally. I will never forget the sound of Wagner's Overture to *Die Meistersinger* from the middle of that great ensemble! The energy I felt that day I still carry with me today, and every time I play that piece I get the same chills I felt the first time I played it in San Francisco. The Youth Orchestra was a huge part of my musical development and the place where I started on my journey of learning the skills to become an orchestral flutist. The group was also a tremendous inspiration to me, and holds a dear place in my heart. After YO, I attended the Curtis Institute for two years before winning the position in Atlanta. I'm now married to the Associate Principal Flutist of the Atlanta Symphony, and we have two daughters.

Elbert Tsai, Violinist, San Francisco Symphony

“The YO introduced me to the idea that one could be a professional musician. I don't think it ever occurred to me that this was even possible until my junior year in high school or so. YO Music Director Alasdair Neale and our violin coach, Zoya Leybin, were my first window into the world of first-rate music-making. Anyone who went through the "Zoya experience" knows that she epitomizes tough love, but she was essentially the reason why we could sound the way we did. I think it's fair to say that the level of playing at the YO surpassed any conservatory orchestra I played for, despite the expectations that a group full of music performance majors would lead to a better product.

“I ended up graduating from college with degrees in computer science and violin. Frankly, it was difficult for me (and especially my parents) to embrace the idea of following a purely musical path. Naturally, they were worried about job security and things of that sort. Looking back, I probably should have been more worried, but a few years in college, I convinced myself that I should devote myself fully to forging a musical career. It took some time for me to put my playing in order, and it was only after nearly four years of studying with Robert Lipsett in Los Angeles that I felt somewhat ready to put myself out there as a professional musician. I probably took five or six auditions for major orchestras before winning this position with the San Francisco Symphony.

“The YO provided me with my first chance to travel to Europe, to see the countries where all of the great music I knew had been written. I also discovered Mahler for the first time (how many 16-17-year-olds get to play Mahler?) and other great standards from the symphonic repertoire. I particularly remember Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* – it was the first piece we rehearsed on my very first day at the YO. I was struck by two things: that the orchestra, even after one note, had already surpassed my highest expectations; and that Zak Grafilo, the YO's concertmaster, could really play. I didn't realize that anyone my age was playing at that level. Around that time, it also started to

dawn upon me that my teachers weren't lying about practice: it really does make you better! And players like Zak really did have to practice in order to be that good.

“If I had to single out one other memory from YO, it would be playing Stravinsky's Rite of Spring. Alasdair would usually recommend a couple recordings for us to check out before our rehearsals started. After my first listening, I thought the piece was just a bunch of noises strung together for 30 minutes. It's hard to believe now, but I really hated it at the time. But as the rehearsals went by, I could feel the piece growing on me, and by the time we performed it, I loved it. Ever since then, I've had to keep my skepticism towards contemporary music in check, just in case I'm proven wrong again.”

Mirabai Weismehl, Violinist, Orquesta del Palau de les Arts “Reina Sofia” de Valencia

In our inaugural week of the Orquesta del Palau de les Arts "Reina Sofia" de Valencia, under the musical directorship of Lorin Maazel, we read Stravinsky's Rite of Spring. The rhythmic impulses, so characteristic of the work, were natural to me, like speaking in my native tongue. I first learned the piece in the San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra. Alasdair insisted that we play the Danse Sacrale at every rehearsal, and for good reason. By becoming so familiar with the music, playing it became not only an intellectual process, but also we were able to see beyond the notes and convey the human emotion represented by the music.

I will forever be grateful for my experience in the SFSYO. It was there that I eventually decided, with the encouragement of our 2nd violin section coach, Zoya Leybin, to become a professional musician. The learning progression for me was a constant incline. At age 14, never having played before in a full orchestra, my first program included Bernstein's West Side Story and Prokofiev's Romeo and Juliet, a personal favorite. Sitting in the last chair of the second violin section, I was amazed that my standpartner could play all of the notes. "How do you do that?!", I asked her. "Oh, you will. It takes time. Just keep practicing." I later learned that we were in fact supposed to play all of the notes, not just the ones that we could. In the next concert set, I found out that we were supposed to watch the conductor at the same time!

In the following years, I grew into leadership positions, namely Co-Principal 2nd violin, Associate Concertmaster, and in my final year, Concertmaster. Along the way, I learned about dynamics between people, the responsibilities of each position, and how to communicate within the section and across the orchestra. Most importantly, I developed a love for orchestral music. My temporary goal was to master the notes and eventually, my instrument. By watching videos of the legendary greats such as Oistrakh, Heifetz, and Milstein, I saw that technique alone is not enough. Finding the music behind the notes is the next step. And to become an artist of the highest caliber, one must relate that profound music to the human heart and voice. By sharing the human emotion through music, we can touch everyone who listens.

I give my thanks to: Alasdair Neale, who always had such a positive attitude and terrific sense of humor, even when jet-lagged after flying back to San Francisco from Los

Angeles; Zoya Leybin, 2nd violin coach and my lifetime teacher--she taught me practically everything I know about orchestral playing; Ron Gallman, who taught me that rules are meant to serve and not hinder; Richard Bains, who sent me the invitation to join the orchestra; Sammi Madison; Kay Hamilton; Tom Rose; my friends and coaches from the San Francisco Symphony; and all of my colleagues from the youth orchestra, many of whom I have been able to meet again in the professional music world.

Amos Yang, Assistant Principal Cellist, San Francisco Symphony

Writing about my experience in the San Francisco Youth Symphony is not an easy thing to do. It certainly was a love-hate relationship at times. Let me explain. I played in the orchestra during its inaugural season but, as sectional coach Jill Brindel can attest to, my 11 year-old mind had a hard time coming to terms with four hour rehearsals on Saturday afternoons. I loved sports and loved being outdoors, so it just felt wrong to be inside when I should have been running around with my friends on the basketball court. So, when the first year concluded and I was informed that I would have to re-audition for the orchestra (i.e. I had been kicked out), I initially felt a sense of relief, almost joy. This was short lived however, as Irene Sharp informed me at my next cello lesson that I was not only going to re-audition but would have to practice during the year for the Youth Orchestra!! I still remember my second audition for Jahja and his words immediately after: "You play very well Amos, but this time you'll practice and pay attention during rehearsals, right?" I could almost feel Irene Sharp's eyes on the back of my neck as I slowly nodded and agreed.

It's now 25 years later and I'm thankful for the second chance I was afforded by Jahja and Jill. Jahja's passion for the music was infectious and Jill's coachings gave us insight to the subtleties of orchestral playing. They gave me critical experiences that helped shape my career from chamber musician to my cello position with the Seattle Symphony. [Amos joined the San Francisco Symphony as Assistant Principal Cellist, effective beginning in August 2007, following his tenure with the Seattle Symphony.] I still remember sitting in the lounge where we held our YO cello sectional, enjoying the sound of the cello section. I remember the European tour and the fabulous concert halls, the sights we saw and the friends that have remained close to this day. More importantly, when I teach or coach today, I'm sure never to give up on a child because you never know when he'll bloom.

By the way, for those of you who were tracking my basketball career, I gave up on my NBA dreams after breaking my left hand for the second time during a Bay Area basketball tournament."