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CYSO marks 60 years of music

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By **JACK BESS** Contributor

It's 60 years old but as young as ever.

Founded in 1946 as a single orchestra by a group of parents and volunteers, the Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestras (CYSO) continues to serve as a top-notch musical experience for talented performers ages 7 to 18. The CYSO -- now four core orchestras with more than 350 musicians -- tackle classic orchestral works, such as Richard Strauss' tone poem "Death and Transfiguration," that pose challenges even for professional ensembles.

And audience members who think they have to scale down their expectations because it's a youth orchestra typically change their minds before the concert ends, said Allen Tinkham, CYSO musical director.

"The biggest surprise people get is that the quality of our performance is much higher than they expect," he said. "People are regularly shocked at the level of the performances."

Committed performers

But it's not so surprising. After all, the young performers are committed to their music, traveling to Chicago for months of rehearsals from communities around Illinois, northwest Indiana and even in Michigan. Their artistry is of such caliber that the CYSO has performed in venues ranging from Symphony Center's Orchestra Hall and the Ravinia Festival to the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam and the National Hall in the Palace of the Arts in Budapest.

"I get the privilege of working with some of the smartest and most talented kids for hundreds of miles," Tinkham said. "There's this energy about working with them that's very different. They're so hungry for the music and the inspiration that their energy feeds each other, and so the performances are often just electric."

The power of playing orchestral music was immediately felt when string-bass player Robin Kesselman had his first rehearsal with CYSO three years ago. It was Dvorak's Ninth Symphony "From the New World," said Kesselman, 17, a junior at Wheaton Warrenville South High School.

"It was just this massive sound, and I thought it was the coolest thing," he said. "I knew it was something I wanted to be in for quite some time. Being in CYSO opened my eyes to a whole new world and style of music. Hopefully, I'll be playing in this type of group for the rest of my life."

Seeing the world

In the shorter term, Kesselman will have another hope fulfilled in June when he and around 90 other CYSO musicians will be on a 12-day concert tour of the Czech Republic, Poland and Germany.

"We're playing in some of the greatest concert halls in Europe, places the most famous composers have played in and written for," Kesselman said. He also looks forward to visiting Leipzig, where his musical hero J.S. Bach spent a great portion of his life. "I love his music," he said.

For Tinkham, working with musicians as young as 7 means being a teacher of much more than just music. Tinkham's favorite teachers were the ones who made he feel that "I should spend my time doing important things and give 110 percent of myself in that pursuit. That's what I try to give them. Whatever they do after they leave CYSO, they have to dedicate themselves 110 percent to whatever they choose to do. It's very important and, in music, absolutely necessary."

CHICAGO YOUTH SYMPHONY ORCHESTRAS

* Chicago Youth Symphony with the Chicago Sinfonietta. 7:30 p.m. Monday, March 19. \$25-\$90, special prices for children. Symphony Center, Orchestra Hall, 220 S. Michigan Ave. (312) 236-3681, Ext. 2.

* CYSO's Encore Chamber Orchestra, Ganz Hall, Roosevelt University, 430 S. Michigan Ave. 7:30 p.m. Saturday, April 14. Free. (312) 939-2207.

* Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestra Spring Concert. Orchestra Hall, 220 S. Michigan Ave. 7:30 p.m. Sunday, May 13. \$15-\$50, \$10 for seniors, children under 6 free. (312) 939-2207.

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