

The SYSO Alumni Interviews

David Harrington continued

What was the extent of your experience in the Seattle Youth Symphony Orchestras?

I was definitely a part of all the youth symphonies. I was in the Little Symphony when I was about 10. Then I moved into the Junior Symphony shortly after that. At probably about age of 13 I got into the Youth Symphony. I went to Marrowstone – for many years we called it Fort Flagler, as I remember – and I attended the summer camp there from about age 11 or 12 until probably I was about 15 or 16.

All the [chamber ensembles] I played in until I was about 17 - everybody was in the Junior Symphony or Youth Symphony. [These were] people that I played with every Saturday and that I got to know as a teenager. At Fort Flagler, in Marrowstone, an important part of the day was playing quartets. Then, when I was about 15, Mr. Sokol's eldest son Mark asked me to be in a group with him, with David Campbell and Audrey King. David Campbell should be known to you. He is the father of the pop musician Beck and a major string arranger in Los Angeles.

Marrowstone now takes place on the campus of WWU in Bellingham. My impression is that, in the 60's, the festival was much more rustic...

Well it was at Fort Flagler State Park. I remember there were areas that you couldn't go because there might still be bombs, shells or something like that left over from the First or Second World War.

And it was rustic. We lived in the dorms. Gradually it got upgraded a little bit and then eventually there were practice rooms. In the earliest days there weren't any practice rooms.

The Seattle Youth Symphony recently performed The Rite of Spring on March 13th. A friend of mine, who wasn't allowed to play rock music at home, told me that, for her, "Stravinsky was the Nine Inch Nails of classical music". You've said that you began playing Jimi Hendrix' "Purple Haze" in Kronos because nothing would make a better encore after playing "The Rite." For that matter, Kronos has also covered a piece by Nine Inch Nails. What are your

thoughts on the convergence of rock and classical music?

[When I asked myself] "what could we do after the Rite of Spring?" the only thing that came to my mind was Purple Haze. Later, when [George W.] Bush became president and he started the war in Iraq and Kronos was traveling around the world, it suddenly occurred to me it was now time to revisit Hendrix's version of the Star Spangled Banner. I'll never forget playing in the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. I told our sound guy to turn it up so Bush could hear it. We were a few hundred yards from the White House, but we tried to make it loud enough for him to hear it.

For me the important thing is that people play music that feels central to their life somehow. There was a young violist at our concert in Indiana two nights ago - he was about 9 years old. I asked him what he was playing. He was playing a Vivaldi piece and he was playing a computer game piece. He was really delighted to be playing this computer game piece, it really got him going. And I thought "That's cool!" You know, the next guy might not think it was cool for him to do that but he was so into it. It made him want to practice and it made him want to play music. Of course that's a good thing. And what some scholar thinks about whether there is going to be computer game music 200 years from now – who gives a damn?

We have to get people where they have some excitement.

Absolutely. The fact is there's been so much fantastic music written for orchestra. It's just a wealth of possibilities. And it's fun to be with your friends – its fun! The fact that you might branch off and do quartets or trios or duos or quintets only makes the orchestra stronger. And what every member brings to the fabric [of the ensemble] is an important thing to think about. One of the great things that I remember about the Seattle Youth Symphony was that there were so many different perspectives. As a young musician you just felt like there was so much to learn. Everybody seemed to know something a little different about music and it was so much

fun to just be with this group. I hope that kind of sense of fun and wonder is still a part of the orchestra experience. Because for me it really got me going on my way.

For more about David Harrington and Kronos Quartet: <http://www.kronosquartet.org/>

Dr. Bret P. Smith continued

What instrument did you start with?

I played violin for a year and then switched over to cello – one of those random things. We all started off on violin then our teacher came one day and said "Okay. If anyone wants to play the cello or bass, this is your day." I looked around and nobody raised their hand. I said "I'll do it," little knowing how much that means – that I would be a cello player for life. After a year or so playing in school, I started to take lessons and got a good teacher who coached me to the point where I was playing pretty well by the time I was in eighth grade or so.

What other instruments do you play?

I play a ton of stuff, actually. I was playing guitar and banjo as a little kid – I remember we just had guitars sitting around. I took piano lessons. I play electric and acoustic bass, jazz banjo and mandolin. I'm okay on violin and viola for teaching purposes.

Do you play regularly?

I've been playing in a jazz trio, RetroPotential (http://www.retropotential.com/Welcome_.html). Our first CD is just called "RetroPotential." The second one is due out in September. I don't think it has an official name yet. We're on Amazon, iTunes, CD Baby or wherever you want to go. I also do early music and I am in the Yakima Symphony cello section.

More on the Sokols

The whole Sokol family is pretty amazing. Some of them eventually went on to other things but all of his kids were fantastic professional players. Mark coached a quartet I was in at Marrowstone

continued on next page

The SYSO Alumni Interviews

and Paula, a violinist, is married to Anthony Elliott, who turned out much later to be my cello teacher when I went to the University of Michigan.

Tony Elliott plays a part in another story about Mr. Sokol. The Concord String Quartet was at Marrowstone. Mark Sokol was the first violin of that quartet and they were a fantastic quartet. They'd won some gigantic competition somewhere and had recording contracts and things. Well, Mr. Sokol jumped in and they performed Brahms G Major Quintet. That was just a marvelous experience for me. I had never heard quartet playing like that and for Mr. Sokol to be such a great violist - I thought he was just the guy conducting and it turns out he's a phenomenally good player - that was a great thing. A lot of big musical personal firsts came for me directly from his hands, not only orchestral but the chamber music part of it too. It was really quite inspiring for a young guy.

Follow-up email from Bret:

I heard back from Tony Elliott, and amazingly he does remember that Mr. Sokol played the Brahms G Major quintet with them on the same concert he played the Schubert C major cello quintet. In his words:

"You are quite right in that it was the Brahms G Major two Viola Quintet that Mr. Sokol played with the Concord, while I did the Schubert 2 Cello Quintet with them. Those performances are strongly emblazoned in my memory as well. I especially remember that Mr. Sokol was every bit the artist with the Viola as he was with the baton."

Favorite memories or proudest moments

I can give you a couple of them. One was purely musical. That was at Marrowstone. Jim Mihara (currently conductor of the Seattle Festival Orchestra) was the concert master at Marrowstone that year. I was on the more experienced end as far as the cello goes. When they made chamber music assignments, we were given this beautiful and kind of difficult Shostakovich trio, Piano Trio #2, op. 67, which we were to play with Anita Cummings, the adult staff

pianist. It's just a really, really difficult, very tragic and very huge piece of music. I remember struggling with that thing and getting intensely interested in doing my best on it and Jim did, too. We were lucky enough to be asked to perform it at the final concert. It was one of those deals where everyone was sort of on our side and the piece of music was really transcendently cool. That was one of the only times in my life where what I was playing and what Jim was playing and everybody was just right in the moment. You could almost hear the oohs and ahs, the thrills and chills - I was just sweating when I was done. I haven't had that feeling playing music very many times since then, and that was the first time I ever had that sort of experience as a performer.

I guess the personal thing that I remember most was receiving the Inspiration Award. That was my last concert with the Youth Symphony. It was also Mr. Sokol's last concert, so it was jam-packed in the old Opera House and there were a lot of alumni and it was all of his favorite stuff and just a huge concert. They didn't tell anyone ahead of time but I was voted to get that award and I had to give a little speech. So I muttered through something and the next day in the PI the reviewer mentioned that Bret Smith won the Inspiration Award and he accepted it with a speech. Given his wherewithal in front of a large crowd he should go into politics (laughter). Getting into education and the university... There's plenty of politics there but I'll never be on a ballot.

Aside from technical musical skills, what are some of the skills, practices, habits, attitudes or other benefits students learn in youth orchestra that prove helpful later in their academic, work or personal lives?

Being exposed to or being around a sort of high aspirational standard of quality. I think you could compare it to what athletes do. That is one thing I remember early on about the Youth Symphony, it was how high the standards were. The literature and the programming - they weren't pulling any punches because we were just a bunch of kids. These were

the actual parts. The rental parts coming through - who knows? The last time they may have been played by the Chicago Symphony or something. Major, major works. Of course the audition season was always a little bit nervous for people because that's when they made the seating assignments. Once we really got rolling you just knew that if you showed up at rehearsal and you weren't prepared or if you weren't on the ball you would be letting people down. It wasn't about you necessarily getting a whole lot of help figuring out how to play your instrument or play your part - that was assumed - although we had lots of sectionals. That was really important. It made the group much better. I've played in other orchestras and some of those Youth Symphony performances were about as good as you could get.

I think for a lot of kids that might be the first chance they get to sit in an orchestra and to hear that magnificent, huge sound and realize, "Oh! This is what it is all about. Wow, I'd better step it up a little bit."

The other thing I remember getting out of it is a real passion for the music, for the art form itself, as a listener. While I do a lot of other things as well, I was always interested in classical music, but just (geeking out about) Mahler's Second Symphony? You know, "Which orchestra (are you listening to)?"

"It's the Fritz Reiner recording."

"Oh yeah, what year?"

You know that kind of classical music nerd thing? I didn't really have anyone in my peer group in my home town that was like that. You know, how rare would it be to have a couple of high schoolers sitting around arguing about what string quartet they liked playing Beethoven Opus 131? "I like the Julliard recording"

"No, no you've got to check out the Emerson, they're better!" you know? That was really great - to be able to feel comfortable around a like-minded community of your peers that were all just as into it as you were.

What interested you in an academic career?

continued on next page

The SYSO Alumni Interviews

I guess I kind of got impatient with how much I had to learn as a teacher. I had not had the all-round training as a string teacher and an orchestra teacher that I felt would be up to what I wanted to do. The thing about teaching is if you screw something up you have to wait a whole year to do it again. "I guess I really blew that first day of school! Wait til next year." It wasn't that bad but I knew that there was so much out there, just in terms of pedagogy, that I didn't really know. A friend influenced me to look at the University of Michigan for graduate school. The year that I happened to go there as a master's student was the first or second year that Tony Elliott, who as I mentioned, was married to Paula Sokol, was a member of the cello faculty there. So I got to go do double duty as an education student and in the cello studio. That was really a special thing - to be able to reconnect with my Youth Symphony and Marrowstone mentors as a grad student.

One thing led to another as I started an academic study of music and music teaching. There are all these angles to take on it. I got interested in musicology and historical aspects of string playing and repertoire and psychology and all kinds of different things. I continued on, finishing my PhD in music education and string education. At that point, the logical step is to look for university and teacher training jobs, which I did. That's what I've been doing ever since - working with school teachers, young teachers-to-be, being involved in the professional organizations, conferences, publishing, research and advocacy, the policy end of things - just whatever I can do that seems to be helpful.

Orchestras in the U.S. are concerned about declining audiences. One obvious contributing factor is a corresponding decline in public school instrumental music programs. How is this impacting your work at the college level?

Its kind of an interesting question because I did a survey study a couple of years ago - we were interested in finding out what the job market is like for string

teachers - and we were surprised to find that the trend is in the upward direction. Schools hiring string teachers, new schools being built and new programs being started. That was kind of nice to know. I've been able with some confidence to tell string performance majors that they really ought to take a look at getting their teaching license. We've had students getting pretty decent jobs, pretty competitive-type jobs, out of Central Washington University. I think that's because, compared to other parts of the country, there are still fewer string programs out here in the Northwest than there should be. When someone takes the initiative and wants to begin a program or kind of stir something up, most communities will be able to support that. You start with a few kids and you get a few more and you get a few more.

I think it just depends on the presence and interest of really well-skilled and motivated teachers to do a good job. You can't build much of anything unless you have somebody that really knows their stuff. Orchestra teaching is a bit of a specialty. For the most part, a lot of schools will have an instrumental music teacher, usually a band person that can do marching band, and (as an afterthought tell them) "here, you have to teach some orchestra, too." I haven't really heard, ever, of a person being hired for an orchestra job and being told "oh, by the way, you have to go direct a marching band." (Laughing.) They just don't work it that way. So, we're talking about a very specialized niche.

Here's something I think is very cool. At the time I got out of graduate school and was looking around trying to find a string or orchestra position in universities, there weren't that many. There are a whole bunch of us out there now at universities training string teachers.

In terms of the big question (the future of orchestras- ed.) - I guess, it's just going to keep us all busy for our whole careers - sustaining what we have and hopefully pushing the boundaries a little bit more into areas where kids really don't have the opportunity to start. That's what I'm interested in. We've gotta get out there

and keep those seeds floating on the breeze.

My angle is the teacher-training thing. We're not always going to have a fantastic string player teaching those strings, but there's plenty of good skill and knowledge we can get to wind players, or piano players, whatever your major instrument may be. The idea is we have a body of pedagogical knowledge and a sequence of technique and some really fundamental principals, great materials now and some publications and exercise books and literature to use with young people. It's a real doable thing almost in the sense of a training regimen - you know - how to get a kid from zero to fourth year violin. We've got that, we know how to do it.

*To learn more about Dr. Bret P. Smith:
www.retropotential.com
<http://www.cwu.edu/~music/musiced/bpsmith.html>*

Danielle Kuhlmann continued

More on Danielle's musical family

My grandpa was in some of the Army bands during World War II with a lot of incredible musicians. He really studied all of them. He talked to them and discussed, really intricately, how their instruments worked and learned how to be a really great educator. So he taught my mom how to play the oboe, he taught my brother how to play the bassoon and he taught me how to play the horn. He could teach all these instruments and obviously he did them well because both my brother and I had a really great foundation, and my mom, too, who's a really great oboe player.

What inspires you to stay so busy - playing music in so many diverse groups and settings?

Well, I think the question kind of answers itself, because just playing in all those groups is what keeps me wanting to do more of it. I think any creative person kind of can't help it. You know, we want to do ten million things. I play in so many different kinds of groups and they all feed

continued on next page

The SYSO Alumni Interviews

off of each other. Then I do non-music-related things as well – it all connects together. It's hard to stop, once you start, it's so much fun.

Aside from technical musical skills, what are some of the skills, practices, habits, or attitudes you learned during your time in SYSO, that have proven helpful in your work or in your life?

Oh, so many things. Let's see, aside from musical things - which are just unending – I think just having that interaction with other people, learning to work with people, learning to be disciplined, and rising to the occasion. Especially in the Youth Symphony. We played music – I tell people we played it and they just can't believe it! I was 15 and we played (Richard Strauss') Alpine Symphony. Unheard of! I gained a lot of confidence from being in that group. Playing a piece like Bruckner 4 or Beethoven 7 with Youth Symphony - that was a really special experience. I realized at a really young age that I could do really great things, whether it was on the instrument or not.

What advice would you give to graduating SYSO musicians who are interested in playing new, alternative music using their classical music training?

It's ultimately about finding the thing that makes you excited and whatever that is, just following that. That will be the key to figuring out what you're going to do. For me, I pursued an orchestral career because that's just what I thought you did. I love playing in an orchestra, I absolutely love it. But after several years going toward that goal I realized that it probably wasn't what I wanted to do, ultimately. Finding my way into Genghis Barbie really helped me to open up and see exactly what my place was in music. It's all a lot clearer to me now that I found that one outlet. You must believe in the thing you want to create, because that is what's going to make people respond – that belief and total confidence in what you want to create. It doesn't matter what it is.

What unique role does music play in cultural diplomacy? In other

words, what have you experienced as intrinsically valuable about music crossing cultural barriers?

I can't really find a thing that is not good about music being a cultural diplomacy tool. It's kind of a huge cliché to say music is the universal language but.. I think it's more about art being the universal language. You don't have to speak. I have worked with a lot of people where we don't speak the same language – at all. I've worked with indigenous kids in the Philippines. Last January I went to Afghanistan. I'm not always teaching classical music or teaching the French horn. You know people don't speak English and they might not even play the French horn, but everybody has art and everybody has culture. It's about sharing that with each other and using that as a way of creating a personal bond between people, which is mostly what we do in our organization (Cultures in Harmony). We want to go over there and have an American presence in a place, especially in Afghanistan, that is peaceful and positive. Music is what I do, so that's what I can bring. It's also about learning from the people I'm working with. That sort of exchange of culture is how you see the similarities between people. We might not wear the same clothes or eat the same food but we all have culture – and we can explore and share that with a person. That's a really strong bond that people won't forget. I definitely have never forgotten. I think that's what the arts are there for – something that we all share, that we all feel and can kind of understand, even if it's different from what we're used to at home.

What role does being a singer continue to play in your life?

I used to do both pretty much equally. I used to sing with the Washington Middle School Jazz Band and I sang with the Garfield Jazz Band - went to the Essentially Ellington Festival with them in 2003. We won that year – that was really fun. I did each equally and didn't know which one I really wanted to do. Eventually I realized I had to pick one, just logistically I had to put more focus into one or the other. I decided to do

French horn because, in order to be a professional singer, I wouldn't be able to keep up the French horn. I'd have to quit, and I couldn't really imagine doing that. I can always sing on the side. It's a lot easier to keep that up. I do a lot of singing now, I love it. The two things are really closely related, they each help the other out so much, which is really great.

Are you still singing with (New York alt-country band) Tatters and Rags?

Yeah, I am still singing with them. It's been a little busy recently so we haven't performed in a while, but it's a really fun band for me to sing in. It's my first rock band experience. I love that band. Really great.

You seem to be pretty savvy about marketing. Where did you learn how to promote yourself? Is this a skill you think SYSO students should work on if they are serious about pursuing a career in music?

Absolutely. Marketing wasn't something we studied in school. I know that they have marketing classes in a lot of colleges now, which is really important. I think it is good for people to understand how that stuff works. I think for me - especially with Genghis Barbie - which is mostly where the marketing comes in handy - it's more about the belief in what you're doing. When we put something together to promote the group, it's not that difficult because we really believe in the group. We're not making anything up or padding anything or exaggerating. We really love the group. We love playing in the group. It's pretty easy to market because we're so excited about it. That's a big part of it. I don't really think people should be pursuing groups and endeavors that they don't care about 500%, because it's not really worth it. It's way too hard. When you really care, it makes it easy to put in a full time amount of hours into something. But (marketing and promotion) are definitely things you have to consider. You can't expect somebody to do that for you anymore. I think that in the coming years, public relations and marketing firms are going to become less popular and it's really going to be

continued on next page

The SYSO Alumni Interviews

artist driven. People like to see the artist working on their own – going rogue (laughs) – taking this in their own hands and doing it the way they want to. That’s what we’re all about, being ourselves. It’s definitely important to know about the business but its more important to pursue something that you really care about.

Post post feminist feminist: I thought you might expound on this concept.

It’s kind of a joke my mom came up with – post post feminist – and then I added the other feminist on there. The whole idea is we’re a little bit tongue in cheek – obviously. The post-post-feminist-feminist idea – sometimes we describe it as a “warrior-woman” attitude. “We’re just girls and we just don’t even care. We’re just going to do our thing the way we want to.” There’s post-feminism – “I’m going to be a woman, I’m going to embrace it” - we’re just past all that while retaining our feminist attitude. (laughs) It’s more for comedic value than anything. Just the idea that we don’t really feel the need to fit into some kind of genre or some kind of idea about what we’re supposed to be doing. We’re just going to be us and have a good time.

Do you keep in touch with friends from SYSO?

Yeah, lots actually. A lot of them are doing really interesting things. I just saw a friend of mine in San Francisco. We played in SYSO, together. He’s a trombone player. Now he’s working for a music education non-profit in San Francisco. He is also studying hip-hop ethnomusicology for a masters degree - really cool stuff. I just ran into a clarinet player I was in SYSO with, Katie Schoeflin. She’s studying at McGill. She also spent a year teaching English in Japan. Then there are people I went to SYSO with who have orchestra jobs and people who are making tons of money doing totally different things. Everybody spreads out but everyone does something interesting. I’m constantly running into people I met at Marrowstone or Youth Symphony.

Danielle’s response to some follow up questions we sent by email.

Your mother mentioned that you once had a chance to perform at a Jeff Beck/Eric Clapton concert. You have also done some soundtrack work as a freelancer. Are there other celebs you’ve played for or memorable soundtracks I can list for our readers?

I did play two sold out shows with Jeff Beck at Madison Square Garden- it’s truly amazing to play for packed stadiums of people who are completely pumped to be there! I was on several movie soundtracks, the remake of The Hills Have Eyes and Nicholas Cage’s Wickerman were probably the bigger ones. I’ve also done some work on Broadway, playing Young Frankenstein and White Christmas, among others.

I didn’t ask you about your jewelry business or the fact that you’ve been attending the Fashion Institute of Technology. Anything you want to add on that front?

I just finished a year studying Jewelry Design at the Fashion Institute of Technology. It was a crazy year, since I was both a full time student and a full time professional musician! It’s incredible how the two fields relate to each other, though, many of my teachers were or are classical musicians or classical music lovers (which maybe made them more sympathetic to my hectic schedule!). I studied other fine arts like Sculpture and Drawing and those classes really helped broaden the way I think about art in general and challenged me to see the parallels between these two facets of my life. This past year at FIT also solidified in my mind that I am going to be a musician, something that I have only become 100% sure of in the last few months. Sometimes you need to have a little distance from something to realize how much you belong in it! But I will continue to make jewelry- even Genghis Barbie themed jewelry!

To find out more about Danielle and Genghis Barbie”

Genghisbarbie.com

Rocohouston.org

CulturesinHarmony.org

Myspace.com/danielleKuhlmann