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OPINION

For nearly 30 years the Dallas symphony has been quietly working to make classical music more diverse

A DSO program to ensure talented low-income kids get private musical training continues to produce leaders.



By Leeanne R. Hay

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Peaceful and radical protester groups across the country have made ongoing national headlines about race relations throughout the U.S. Each alliance heatedly tries to take measures into their own hands, with fleeting resonance. Yet one solution quietly born nearly 30 years ago is thriving in downtown Dallas.

I met the late Dwight Shambley, a longtime bassist with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, over four years ago. Tall with a distinguished demeanor and soft hazel eyes, he had a presence similar to James Earl Jones, with a voice that was more tenor than bass. Quick with a smile, he told me an entertaining story about how he had come to play the double bass that would lead him to the DSO.

In the 1950s, when Shambley was a child, his parents decided their children “had to learn to play the piano.” His parents were both blue-collar workers who worked in manufacturing plants. One worked for Westinghouse, the other for the Ford Motor Company. They believed that the path to a better life for their children was through education, and a comprehensive education included music and piano lessons.

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Before long, Shambley told his mother he “hated piano,” so she allowed him to switch to the only other available instrument, a viola. Shambley didn’t care for the viola either, so his mom allowed him to “switch one last time to the trumpet.” The trumpet led him to believe he might have a future as a jazz musician, “despite not being able to hit a high C.”

At the start of eighth grade, the school music director told him she didn't need a fourth trumpet in the orchestra. What she needed was a double bass because there were none. Since Shambley was tall, she decided he was the one for the instrument. Despite his protests, "it was the double bass or no orchestra for me, so I became the bass player," he recalled. "It turned out well," he said, smiling.

During the early 1970s, when Shambley began his symphony career, auditions for a job were open. That is, a musician would submit a résumé, be told when and where to show up, play what was asked for, and then await a decision from the orchestra committee. Shambley won the audition for a position with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra in 1972, right out of college. (So rarely does this happen that Shambley's own college studio professor sent him off to the audition with information about how to get into graduate school when he got back.)



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When asked whether he had any concern about racial bias in the process before he took the audition, Shambley said, "Yes and no. I always felt like there would be those who would be against me, and also for me."

Outside of the concert hall, Dallas' race relations were moving toward a crescendo of change. The first Black Americans had been elected to the Dallas Independent School District in 1967 (Emmett Conrad served until 1977) and the Dallas City Council in 1968 (George L. Allen served until 1975).

As the decade progressed, American orchestras became more aware of bias and the need to confront it. Auditions started to be held behind screens (known as blind auditions). Only the quality of musicianship would guide a committee to their final selection.

By the late 1980s, all major orchestras had adopted the blind audition format. The process would evolve to include carpeting behind the screens to block the noise of high heels, which could identify musicians as female. Neither race nor gender would any longer influence an orchestra's selections. Still, nearly 20 years after Shambley won his seat with the DSO, when he looked around at his orchestra, and all the major American orchestras, the faces that looked back at him were almost all white.

In 1991, Shambley and colleague Marion Davies, former principal cellist of the DSO, deconstructed what it really took to get to the concert hall just to get to an audition. Davies also had broken a barrier in 1975, as one of the first women to secure the principal cellist position in a major orchestra in the United States. Shambley and Davies knew from personal experience that talent and hard work were givens. Still, there was a long list of quantifiable components that, if not met, would make a career as a classical musician inaccessible. They found that financial support was the engine driving success.

Private lessons led the must-haves list, followed by instrument access and maintenance, performance wardrobe, event and competition entrance fees and transportation, which could cost thousands of dollars a year. When a family wondered how they would pay rent and buy groceries, the foundation of music performance success was not on the list of necessities.

In 1992, Shambley and Davies launched the Young Strings program with eight Black and Latino children who showed extraordinary talent when assessed for music aptitude, their willingness to do many hours of work each week, and family encouragement. Providing string instruments and rigorous training to children in Dallas not only opened a path for a new group of student musicians to the concert stage, but also to a better life.

The program had no funding in the beginning and depended solely on volunteers. Small donations began to trickle in, and a couple of members of the executive board of the Dallas Symphony Association provided their professional services free of charge to create the documents for a nonprofit entity. This helped to win financial grants. When a former DSO executive board chairman found out about what Shambley and Davies were up to, he persuaded the symphony association to support the effort.

Today the nonprofit runs on modest funding from many sources, and private-lesson teachers take only a small fraction of what they would typically charge. No one is watching the clock when a lesson goes past its scheduled 60 minutes. The relationship private-lesson teachers have with their students in Young Strings often goes beyond class instruction to life skills like work ethic, perseverance and discipline. Stamos Martin, a cello alumnus, recalled, "My teacher was Mimi McShane — a truly amazing woman, both strict and exacting while

comforting and playful.” His voice became soft when he shared that McShane had died in 2013. Students still feel her impact through an endowment memorial.

When I spoke with two Young Strings alumni from the early years of the program, I asked about its influence on their lives. Houston attorney Leandro Vargas and Austin international insurance broker Ashley Hunter separately responded with the same answer. Being a student in the program created a desire to succeed and positively impact others.

“The program was a lifeline for me,” Vargas said. “It was that critical period in my life where I saw the American dream in its true form and realized that I, too, was a part of it. My teacher, Pam Askew, the YS program, the DSO, and its generous donors have all contributed to and share in every success I have achieved in my life.” He quietly added, “A violin was the difference between a gang and a future.”

Alumna Catalina Simmons, now a college-level music teacher, said, “My teacher, Mitta Angell, was an actual angel in my life. Besides teaching me the viola, she was also my accompanist, recording engineer, sheet music provider, and driver to and from lessons with her dog, Douglas. Most importantly, she was my mentor and my friend.”

Even the pandemic cannot stop the Young Strings program, which continues with Zoom lessons and socially distant events. The program starts in four Dallas elementary schools within close proximity of the Meyerson Symphony Center. The study path progresses through high school, including the Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts, and opens the doors to the future with preparation for college auditions. Young Strings graduates have a 98% acceptance rate for college admissions.

Many alumni have become successful business people and community leaders. Several have chosen to attain degrees in music education instead of a performance degree to honor their own teachers and give back to their communities. A few have lucrative careers as freelance musicians like Bianca McClure and Richmond Punch.

When not waylaid by the pandemic, McClure performs on tour with notable groups, movie orchestra scores and national television events like the Super Bowl and Grammy Awards. Punch, with a performance degree from The Juilliard School and a master of music from Yale School of Music, has a commercial performance production company and teaches workshops as far away as Alaska.

“Learning the step-by-step processes to master a new concerto as a student were transferable skills to a successful career,” said Punch. “Being organized and working hard during practice every day instilled the dedication to accomplish an artistic career through my creativity. I

have been successful because of what my classical training instilled in me despite not winning a seat in a top-tier orchestra,” he added.

In 2018, DSO chief executive Kim Noltemy announced an initiative to expand music education with group lessons to underserved neighborhood schools in South Dallas. The Young Musicians program provides an assortment of instruments to students, access to concerts, and local artist and musician collaborations in the neighboring communities.

Davies, who died in 2012, devoted 20 years to the program. In late January this year, Shambley died after a lengthy battle with cancer that rarely kept him away from teaching. He had dedicated three decades of his life to creating opportunity in Dallas, by teaching that the only black-and-white distinctions that mattered were on sheet music.

Today, dedicated Young Strings staffers and several DSO musicians are keeping Shambley’s excellence and initiatives alive. Whether that jumping-off point leads students to the concert hall or elsewhere in a productive society does not matter.

These hidden measures will continue to reverberate for years to come.

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In This Story

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