

People



Angels

Violins? Voilà!

Aaron Dworkin helps kids rehearse so American orchestras will be more diverse

It's the Detroit Public Library, and it's loud. This morning there are scratchy violins, clunky piano scales and a few trumpets with asthma. Welcome to the Sphinx Preparatory Music Institute: 61 African-American kids taking a well-coached whack at classical music. "I've already learned I can make two different beats at the same time," bragged budding drummer Oronde Bandele, 12. "I've always wanted to play trap drums. Maybe I'll play in a band sometime."

For Aaron Dworkin, that's the payoff. A violinist since the age of 5, Dworkin, 34, couldn't help but notice

a dearth of African-American and Hispanic musicians in orchestras across the U.S. "This was a gross inequity," he says. "I didn't want others to feel as alone as I did as a kid. I felt driven to do something about it."

So in 1996 Dworkin started the Sphinx Organization, a nonprofit that is changing the face of classical music—training and supporting some 200 aspiring minority musicians and, through outreach programs around the country, exposing 20,000 elementary school students a year in largely black and Hispanic areas to Beethoven and Bach. The Detroit Prep school,

opened in September, gives free instruction. But Sphinx's centerpiece is an annual competition for young black and Hispanic string players, with prizes of up to \$10,000. All 87 entrants have gone on to prestigious schools and conservatories, and 16 have performed as soloists with 25 major orchestras.

"Aaron Dworkin has established—singlehandedly—the need for every classical music organization to commit to diversity," says Benjamin Zander, conductor of the Boston Philharmonic. "When Aaron started, you would rarely see a black or Hispanic soloist



Dworkin jams with Sphinx students. "There's no opportunity to play chamber music like this in Detroit," he says, "and no opportunity to perform with minority musicians."

Photograph by BLACK/TOBY

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with a major orchestra," adds Steve Shipp, professor of violin at the University of Michigan. "Now it's becoming routine."

For artists, Sphinx has been a transforming experience. "I'd never have imagined I'd play with the Boston Pops or the National Symphony in D.C.," says violinist Gareth Johnson, 19, a 2002 winner, now at the Lynn Conservatory in Boca Raton, Fla. Cellist Patrice Jackson, 22, a 2002 winner, earned a scholarship to Juilliard through Sphinx and gigs with 20 major orchestras. "Without Sphinx," she says, "I'd never have had these chances."

As a child, Dworkin didn't want for opportunities. Born in Monticello, N.Y., he was adopted at two weeks by white neuroscience professors from Manhattan, Barry Dworkin, 60, now at Penn State Medical School, and his wife, Susan, a violinist, who died last year. Dworkin excelled early at the violin but found practice tedious. Once, his father recalls, "the kid was standing there, playing the violin, with *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* on the floor, reading and turning the pages with his toes."

At 10, Dworkin moved to Hershey, Pa. "There was only one black family," he says. "I got Racial Issues 101, with a heavy dose of ostracism. I used music to escape." Dworkin was concertmaster of the Harrisburg Youth Symphony and attended Michigan's Interlochen Arts Academy, where he met his future wife, Carrie. After a brief stint as a Penn State business major he dropped out and moved to Michigan with her, working on and off for environmental groups and as a lobbyist. "We spent years with pretty rough times," Dworkin says. "Poverty, getting evicted. But I also got experience with nonprofits."

“ I didn't want others to feel as alone as I did as a kid ”



Violinist Isaac Stern met with Dworkin at the '98 Sphinx Competition.

He missed the violin, however, and with financial aid, enrolled at Michigan to major in music. There he started Sphinx, named for what he calls the "pinnacle of achievement." After a \$10,000 donation from World Bank president James Wolfensohn, corporate bucks flowed in. (Sphinx's \$1.5 million budget comes from a long list of sponsors, including the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, American Express and the big three automakers.) In 1997 he and Carrie wed, and two years later their son Noah was born. Last year, after a long separation, they divorced. Mitigating the loss, perhaps, Dworkin realized a lifelong dream. In 2001, through a Web site, he located and met his birth parents: Vaughn Moore, an African-American hospital worker, and his wife, Audeen, who is white. "I've been pray-



Even at 3, says Dworkin's father, "he had a kind of charisma."

ing my whole life for that moment," says Audeen, an emergency management administrator. (Not yet wed to Vaughn, she had been forced by her parents to give Aaron up.) Says Dworkin: "It was the kind of experience music was created for. I couldn't express it in words."

He sees the Moores several times a year, and they hope to be at Carnegie Hall Dec. 8, when 25 Sphinx alumni give a concert. Dworkin longs for a time when such an event is mundane. "My hope is that one day nobody makes a big deal about hiring a minority classical musician," Dworkin says. "I hope there's no need for a Sphinx Organization and I can go off to write poetry and play my violin."

By Richard Jerome. Barbara Sandler in Detroit

Do you know someone working to make a difference in the world? Send suggestions to heroesamongus@peoplemag.com. Please include your name, phone number and return e-mail address.