

Pro-Am players’ swings meet students who play strings

By LISA LAPIN

AS EXECUTIVE director of the Monterey Symphony, Nicola Reilly does much more than coordinate 14 world-class classical concerts a year, each comprising more than 75 musicians performing for more than 10,000 audience members and 5,000 local students.

Every other week, the violinist also takes her instrument to the Martin Luther King School for the Arts in Seaside and works with the school’s violin class. While the school has been gifted 20 violins in all the right sizes, it’s a tremendous help for the teacher to have Reilly present to provide additional instruction and inspiration.

The Monterey Symphony has rounded out the equipment donation with its own gift of music books and violin shoulder rests (helpful to the musician but not usually vis-

ible to the audience) that the school otherwise couldn’t afford.

Significant boost

“We help schools supplement wherever we can,” said Reilly. “We establish relationships with music teachers, so we can be an asset and resource to them. Music teachers don’t have shoulder-rest money in their budget. But it’s going to be such a game changer, because kids can play so much better with them. Sometimes the smallest thing can have a great impact.”

The Monterey Symphony’s education programs receive a significant boost from grants made through the Monterey Peninsula Foundation. The foundation is one of the largest funders of the regional symphony, making the support received through proceeds from the AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am critical to its operations.

“The Monterey Peninsula Foundation is a huge funder, and they have increased funding over the last few years,” Reilly said. “We are so grateful for their support, especially of our youth programming and education.”

Each year, the Monterey Symphony holds orchestral performances for students from more than 40 schools throughout Monterey and San Benito counties.

Last October, the students saw the full orchestra perform “Love Letter to Hollywood,” classical music scores from popular films. Students from third grade through high school came from every corner of the county and beyond, from Hollister High School to the northeast, south to San Ardo and Bradley, and from Soledad, Gonzalez, Greenfield, Salinas, King City and Marina.

Students packed the 1,800-seat Sherwood Hall in Salinas for four performances, which were filled nearly the moment notices were sent to schools and teachers.

“We see this huge demand. The more programs we can present, the more we can fill,” Reilly said. “Some districts want all of their third graders or all of their fifth graders, to go. They find it so valuable. There can be 1,000 students in each grade in some of our districts.”

Preparation

Before every performance, a musician goes to each school for an assembly. There, students learn about classical and orchestral music and see demonstrations of instruments



PHOTOS/MANNY ESPINOZA

Nicola Reilly (left, by the whiteboard) works with young musicians countywide, including kids at Seaside’s Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. School of the Arts.

MUSIC

From page 14ATT

such as violins and cellos. And they learn about concert etiquette, including sitting still and staying quiet.

“I always take my own violin and a student-sized violin, so I can play a game with the kids,” Reilly said. “I ask them to come up and try to play. There are always a couple of brave kids, and everyone can see how the bow makes the sound.”

On the big day, students can attend the performance, which is always narrated in Spanish and English. The symphony spends \$20,000 a year for buses to get the students there. “Over half of the schools take us up on the offer of our bus scholarship,” Reilly said. “They often don’t have funds for field-trip transportation.”

Getting dressed up

Throughout the year, the symphony also engages with students on a smaller scale. In addition to Reilly, other Monterey Symphony musicians regularly visit local schools to help supplement the music curriculum. For example, a cellist goes to the dual language academy in Monterey, which has a new small chamber orchestra.

Founded in 1946, the Monterey Symphony holds 12 professional concerts a season — two performances each of six classical music programs on Saturday evenings and Sunday afternoons at Sunset Center in November, February, March, April and May, and in October outdoors at the Forest Theater.

Upcoming performances include pieces by Brahms, Beethoven, Haydn, Mozart, Rachmaninoff and Tchaikovsky. Professional musicians come from throughout the region, including from the San Francisco Bay area.

While Reilly runs the orchestra’s operations, Jayce Ogren, who joined the group as its 12th conductor in 2022, oversees the musical component. Under his leadership, the symphony has commissioned new works, including the world premiere last year of “Sacred Land:

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra” by John Wineglass, part of a series of performances inspired by the Big Sur region. A documentary film on the symphony’s website, in partnership with the Big Sur Land Trust and the Esselen Tribe of Monterey County, follows the creative process of Wineglass and violinist Edwin Huizinga.

For its Feb. 15 performance of Brahms’ Symphony No. 1 at Sunset Center, the Monterey Symphony has invited every student who plays in a youth orchestra in the region — about 200 kids — to a Saturday evening pre-party and the full performance. Teens from El Sistema Pajaro Valley, El Sistema Salinas, Youth Music Monterey County, and Monterey and Carmel High will get dressed up and

take it all in.

“They can play instruments, but they also need to understand the culture of attending a symphony. They need the experience of attending a professional event,” Reilly said. “I grew up in the youth orchestra system in Seattle. I got to play side by side with professional musicians from the Seattle Symphony. I got to understand the music ecosystem and how we fit into that.

“I want to provide a lot of the same things to the kids here to inspire them to keep up with it. The skills you develop — to sit in an orchestra, to be disciplined, to work within a group and team — they are priceless out in the world and especially when kids go to college.”