

## Youth Movement



Harmony Project and a new generation of instrumentalists  
By Nancy D. Lackey Shaffer  
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A dozen or so musicians focus intently on their conductor as he waves his baton, guiding them through the proper tempo and emphasis of Gustav Holst's

"The Planets."

Each section (woodwind, strings, flute) is run separately through its most challenging bars, then the group discusses the use of marcato and staccato articulations in various phrasing. A pretty typical rehearsal for any orchestra — except that this one is made up of elementary and middle school students.

These young musicians are part of the New West Symphony's Harmony Project, a music education program (and affiliate of the larger Los Angeles-based Harmony Project) that aims to bring musical instruction and performance to underserved Ventura communities. Founded in 2011, it began as an independent nonprofit before being "adopted" by the symphony in 2012. Through the Harmony Project, students at Sheridan Way, E. P. Foster and Will Rogers Elementary Schools and De Anza Middle School have the opportunity to attend concerts, obtain an instrument and receive



quality, professional music instruction — all for free.

Left to right, Esmeralda Robles fifth grade, Dulce Silva

sixth grade and Aaliyah Bruns third grade.

Photo By: T Christian Gapen

"Our mission is youth empowerment through music," says Andrea Landin, education and artistic operations manager. "And also to develop an openness to new things and new cultures through music. We want to show kids that there aren't boundaries to music."

Much of the Harmony Project's curriculum is based in classical music, but the program has sought to introduce students to other genres and sounds. Arrangements might come from folk music, jazz (the theme from the *Pink Panther* is a favorite) or world music. And while there will always be a place for Bach, Beethoven and Brahms, contemporary composers such as Gustav Holst and Richard Strauss are fair game as well.

Harmony Project participants start in the third grade, where they play the recorder and learn to read music, improvise and perform. Students who stay with the program are assigned an instrument in fourth grade, and receive instruction from professional musicians and educators. Community volunteers come in once a month to provide one-on-one instruction. Participants are expected to attend classes at least two times a week, although some (based on their interest and proficiency) come more often. Most classes are taught at Sheridan Way, but on Thursday evening the Harmony Project uses space at Bell Arts Factory. The program is just in its fifth year, so its oldest members are still in middle school, and students have the option to stay with Harmony Project through 12th grade. The length, consistency and quality of education instills musicianship that will last a lifetime.

"By putting time and practice into something you can improve. That's a really important skill that music can teach," says Andrew Conrad, who teaches saxophone and clarinet.

Beyond a sheer love of music, many of the students in the Harmony Project have found the vast variety of music to be a revelation. Ten-year-old Kimberly Gonzalez, who plays keyboard, the violin and a guitar-like instrument called a *jarana*, says she's always been musically inclined, but that the Harmony Project gave her a deeper appreciation. "I've been hearing so much advanced music by going to concerts," she says, naming Brahms and Benedetto Marcello as two of her favorite composers.

Flutist Claudia Mora, 14, has been with the program from the beginning. "I didn't know Beethoven until I joined Harmony Project," she says. "I really like him and now I know so much more about him."

Saxophone player Emiliano Almanza has a particular fondness for jazz ("It's good songs, and smooth") and Hungarian dance ("There's all kinds of different parts playing at once"), but mostly just loves the diversity of Harmony Project's selections. "I like that we get all kinds of music," he says. "Sometimes it's hard, sometimes it's easy, but it's always fun."

The emotional expression is what speaks the most to 11-year-old cellist Aliasha Valdivia. "Bach and Vivaldi make music that shows their feelings about what they're writing," she explains. "Bach wrote a piece about winter

— it was cold and wintry, and that really came through in the music.”

And every single student will tell anyone who cares to ask that “The teachers are awesome.”

This enthusiasm has been infectious: The program has grown from just a few dozen students in the beginning to over 100. “We have 120 kids this year,” Landin says, noting that word of mouth and sibling sign ups have contributed to the expansive growth. “The kids doing it have been really invested. We actually have a waiting list of 40 right now.”



Livia Vertucci, fourth grade, Isaac Castillo, fifth grade.  
Photo By: T Christian Gapen

As the talents and abilities of their students have improved, Harmony Project classes have expanded. Due to popular demand, a jazz ensemble was added this year, and an improv group is getting off the ground as well.

In 2013, the program debuted a youth orchestra for its older and more proficient students. Originally just a string orchestra, it now features saxophone, clarinet, flute and percussion.

“2015 was the first year we had to have auditions,” Landin says, noting that around 35 kids were competing for 15 spots. “Having experience with auditions is valuable for these young musicians.”

Orchestra conductor Vlad Vizireanu, who started last fall, is immensely impressed by the dedication and musicianship of his young instrumentalists. “The LA Philharmonic is nothing compared to these guys,” he says with a laugh. “You really have to be on your game with them. One thing I really enjoy is that they are incredibly honest. They haven’t been knocked down by the music world. They are at their most formative stage.”

The Harmony Project Youth Orchestra will have a chance to strut its stuff in March when it opens for the New West Symphony Orchestra’s performance of Gustav Holst’s “The Planets” — one of the most ambitious arrangements yet for these budding performers.

Landin takes particular pride in the *Son Jarocho* group, which started in 2014. *Son Jarocho* is a regional folk music that hails from Veracruz, Mexico; its key instrument is the jarana. The ensemble has been very popular with Harmony Project’s Latino participants (which make up the majority of the student body). “We have 18 kids playing [*son jarocho*],” Landin says. “That’s been exciting because it’s very reflective of our

community, and we’ve been able to do a lot of collaboration between Western and non-Western music.”

In 2014 the Harmony Project also offered its first summer camp, featuring two-week sessions of daily instruction. Unlike everything else available through Harmony Project, summer camp sessions aren’t free, but the cost is a fraction of what a similar program at a prestigious institution would cost. “It was an intensive experience,” Landin recalls. “The experience of working every day and seeing your progress was phenomenal, and the students were able to really throw themselves into it.”

Students aren’t the only ones who appreciate the Harmony Project — parents do, too. Irma Juarez is impressed by how focused her son, 12-year-old Daniel, is. “He goes to music class three days a week, and practices his clarinet almost every day,” she says with pride.

“It’s been great for him because he has more discipline,” says Maria Espanola of her son, Daniel, a seventh grader who plays flute. “He’s doing better in school because the music helps him concentrate. And the program is teaching him goals, which he can apply to school as well.”



Wendy Montejano, seventh grade.  
Photo By: T Christian Gapen

She also notes that working with other students and learning different types of music has opened his mind to new ideas and new ways of thinking. “I’ve become passionate about this type of musical education,” professes teacher Conrad. “It exposes them to a lot of different ways of thinking. In my classes, we talk a lot about what music is, what art is. I think it’s important to give this sort of opportunity to kids who wouldn’t otherwise get it.”!

*The Harmony Project Youth Orchestra will open for the New West Symphony Orchestra’s March 27 performance in Oxnard. For tickets and more information visit [www.newwestsymphony.org](http://www.newwestsymphony.org) or call 497-5800.*