

# PEAK PERFORMING



The Colorado-based National Repertory Orchestra has been churning out top US orchestral musicians for almost 60 years – 40 of which have been under the leadership of music director Carl Topilow. Laurinel Owen spoke to students and staff about the programme's outstanding success rate

The hills are alive with the sound of music! If one can call an altitude of 9,600ft above sea level a hill. Either way, there are lots of musical sounds in Breckenridge, Colorado, the home of the National Repertory Orchestra (NRO). Its alumni have gone on to play in ensembles such as the Boston and Chicago symphony orchestras, the Philadelphia and Cleveland orchestras, and the New York and LA philharmonics, to mention only the very top tier, so I wanted to discover the secret of its success in training young instrumentalists to become pros.

Founded in 1960 with a mission 'to fill the gap between academic musical training and the competitive world of the professional musician', the organisation accepts 88 young musicians each year, from the ages of 18 to 29, who have completed at least one year of college. Those who win a place attend the eight-week summer festival for free.

The NRO's principal conductor and music director since 1978 has been Carl Topilow, who during the academic year is the conductor and director of the orchestral programme at the Cleveland Institute of Music (a position he has held for 37 years and from which he retires next year) and of the Cleveland Pops Orchestra (which he founded). His résumé also boasts conducting appearances with more than 120 orchestras in 37 US states and 12 different countries. As the festival hurtles towards its 60th anniversary in 2020, I spoke with maestro Topilow.

'This year we chose our orchestra after hearing 800 auditions,' he told me. 'So, you can see even from the very first step we are preparing our youth for the rigours of the competitive marketplace. I would say, though, that the single most important aspect of our training programme is the amount of repertoire our fellows have to learn in a very short period. This is not like a college environment with one or two rehearsals a week and then one performance each semester. We prepare two full orchestral concerts every week with only nine and a half hours of rehearsals per concert, and they are big programmes: Mahler, Prokofiev, Stravinsky. You get the idea.'

'We add to that pops and kiddie concerts, fundraisers and community outreach events. For example, the orchestra participated in a fundraiser in Denver where we played arrangements of 1980s rock while the guests danced. Additionally, the group performs for the benefit of other non-profit-making organisations, so the musicians have the experience of being part of the money-making solution. They learn to give.'

Violin soloist Elizabeth Pitcairn (pictured near right) is an alumna of the NRO. She plays Stradivari's 1720 'Red Mendelssohn' violin, which reportedly inspired the Academy award-winning score for the 1998 film *The Red Violin*. She enthused: 'I attended in 1994, '95 and '96. In the first two years I was assistant concertmaster and in the last, concertmaster.'

COURTESY OF COLLEEN HEWY



PIUCAIRN PHOTO BY STEVE

As such, I was given the opportunity to perform as soloist Wieniawski's Violin Concerto no.1, the Tchaikovsky and Sibelius concertos as well as solos in Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*, Strauss's *Don Juan* and *Don Quixote* and Stravinsky's *Pulcinella*. Carl's rehearsal technique is so efficient that he makes learning all that rep possible. The experience was also special because I made lifelong friends with whom I still collaborate, either as part of my touring schedule or at the Luzerne Music Center in New York State, where I am president, CEO and artistic director. Colleagues from my tenure at the NRO went on to the Cleveland, Baltimore and Met orchestras. We were an all-star cast.'

Maestro Topilow clarified: 'I understand the players' musical needs and structure rehearsals so that they feel special. I respect and trust my orchestra and give them a practical, real-life experience that they can build on after they leave the programme. However, I don't hold their hands. Our musicians have to be self-motivated and are given opportunities to go out on their own.'

'I learnt that everyone's role in the orchestra is important,' confirmed Audrey Lee (pictured top right), a recent master's graduate in violin performance from the University of Texas at Austin who gained a place at the NRO this summer. 'In most orchestras it's easy to feel like a cog in the machine, but in the NRO I learnt to listen. Since the section rotates and there are so



Conductor Carl Topilow leads his National Repertory Orchestra against the backdrop of the Colorado mountains

many incredible violinists, each with a different style and energy, I had to learn how to adjust and fit in. I realised not only that my colleagues were inspiring, but also that I myself create a special energy. If you had asked me two months ago I couldn't have said: 'Yes, I can learn several concerts a week.' But it happened! We discovered that we are capable, if we push ourselves to achieve 'the impossible'.'

Another fellow and violinist, Marisa Ishikawa (pictured below), is currently pursuing a doctorate at the University of Colorado. 'Of course, the programme is cost-effective, since it is free,' she stated. 'I attended two years ago, then last year went to Aspen, but decided to return to the NRO programme this summer. I love its intimacy and the chance to know everyone. But for me, besides the emphasis on orchestral playing and this season's opportunity to perform 'Spring' from Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, what makes the festival special is our interaction with the community – our outreach projects.'

'Audrey and I were assigned to work together as a duo in a pop-up concert. We played selections from *Wood Works*, which are arrangements of Nordic folk music by the Danish Quartet. We pared down the score and then transitioned into Bartók duos. I played a drone while the audience sang and >



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**'THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECT OF OUR TRAINING PROGRAMME IS THE AMOUNT OF REPERTOIRE OUR FELLOWS HAVE TO LEARN IN A VERY SHORT PERIOD'**  
CARL TOPILOW, NRO MUSIC DIRECTOR

clapped along with us. We highlighted the purpose of musicians working together as a team. Afterwards we conducted a question and answer session. People stopped me in the street to say they couldn't wait to hear us again. Because of that performance, one of the ladies who saw us attended a symphony concert for the first time. It is special to share music that I love.'

This programme of interactive performances with audiences was taught by double bassist Mary Javian (pictured below), chair of career studies at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. She spoke to me from the Verbier Festival in Switzerland: 'I teach musicians how to engage with the community and bring their artistry to schools, galleries, parks, squares, hospitals, homeless shelters and prisons. Instead of asking: "What do I want to play?" I ask: "Who am I playing for?"'

'Everyone in the NRO is required to participate. We want the audience to have a unique experience, be engaged and involved. The more musicians go into orchestras with this skill set, the better it is for the orchestras. The town of Breckenridge is family orientated, so we want to give families something they can do together. Since music hasn't consistently been taught in schools for 20 to 30 years now, there needs to be an entry point into instrumental music.'

Javian's intern this year was Nicolas Gonzalez (pictured top right), who acted as community engagement fellow. 'It's a crash course in audience development,' he told me. 'There were 20 groups that played 33 to 34 "pop-up" performances.'



We want pedestrians to stop by and participate, so we simply erect a tent and give the ensemble a microphone. My job was to activate Mary's advice: have fun, be inclusive and don't dumb down the language. The commentary shouldn't sound like a music history lesson. The fact that I'm not a classical musician was advantageous because I could give my response to the players' approach, letting them know whether or not it appealed to me.



'For example, we had a quartet play Mozart K157. They asked the audience: "Do you hear a story or a feeling?" First, they played happily and joyfully, then angrily. They followed the Mozart with Scott Joplin's *The Entertainer*, first with a swing beat and then repeated straight like Mozart. Next, the reverse - Mozart with swing. The listeners heard instant proof that the interpretation affects the feeling.'

These impromptu concerts are only part of the reason for the orchestra's local support. Barbara Calvin is head of the Community Link programme, which pairs a host with each orchestral musician. She organises volunteer families to become 'mums and dads' to the fellows while they are away from home, the goal being to integrate the musicians into the fabric of the community.

She recalled how she became involved with the NRO: 'My husband and I were living in Geneva at the time, and I had worn a new dress to a gala there. We then returned to Colorado for the summer and attended a gorgeous function here for the NRO - and I got to wear my dress again! I was hooked, joined the board and now match host families with musicians (this season 44 families for 88 musicians). The hosts provide the kids with meals and organise non-musical activities. For example, we have one who loves to do "14ers" - hiking above 14,000ft. He is 74, and just after lung surgery he led four participants up a mountain. There's not much air at that altitude. They got up at 3.30am and were back for a rehearsal at noon.'

'This year my husband bought really good seats to a Colorado Rockies baseball game for the entire orchestra and took us all out for lunch. For many in the group it was their very first live sporting event. Through Community Link we >



Feeling the American spirit: Topilow speaks to the audience while brandishing a clarinet in US flag colours

also took orchestra members white-water rafting, horseback riding and on picnics. We open up a breathing space, so the participants have a gap in time when they don't have to worry about practising or performing.'

Barbara Vonderheid is the organisation's legal counsel as well as a host 'parent': 'Through Community Link, I became a host parent eight years ago – because of the musicians themselves and their devotion to perfection and what it takes to excel at this level. I was taken by their passion, which gives me hope for the future. I'm given a glimpse into their lives, careers, dreams and how they figure out a survival strategy. We are all enriched. This is about young people moving forward. This is about being a part of hope that transcends humanity.'

Currently an associate professor of violin at the University of Michigan, Danielle Belen (pictured left) was concertmaster of the NRO in 2006 and 2007 and performed the Brahms and Sibelius violin concertos. 'Relationships and contacts built during such an intense summer can last a lifetime,' she says. 'I made friends at NRO that to this day have remained important to my career and well-being. Breckenridge is a magical place to make music, study and build that important bridge between student and professional life.'

'It's true,' concurred Topilow. 'We can't underestimate the importance of the environment. Our venue has improved from a high school auditorium in the Denver suburb of Evergreen to a leaky tent in Keystone. Now we perform at the Riverwalk Center, which feels like we are playing outdoors because the back of the auditorium is glass and overlooks snow-capped mountains, which is magnificent – and doesn't leak.'

'There was a black bear on my street at 6.30 this morning,' chuckled Calvin. 'In the spring we have moose, and as the kids walk to rehearsals in the summer they see foxes with their kits. Breckenridge is an old 1850s gold-mining town complete with old Victorian homes.'

**'I AM TAKEN BY THE YOUNG MUSICIANS' PASSION, WHICH GIVES ME HOPE FOR THE FUTURE. I'M GIVEN A GLIMPSE INTO THEIR LIVES, CAREERS AND DREAMS' – BARBARA VONDERHEID, NRO BOARD MEMBER**

I questioned maestro Topilow about his dreams and future goals. 'We will continue to provide an optimum orchestral experience,' he stated. 'I want to bring in more high-level coaches – this season we had members of the Philadelphia Orchestra – broaden our collaborations to include dance, opera, children's chorus, composers and commissions and get orchestral management experts from the League of American Orchestras to come and speak to our musicians. This summer I conducted *The Wizard of Oz*. We extracted the music from the film and played it live during a screening. That was a huge success. We'll do another film next year. I brought in first-class guest conductors and have an assistant conductor programme that is significant – many of our conducting alumni are now working professionally and have won awards.'

'Put this all together and our programme encourages young artists to choose to become professional musicians. They go home and back to their lives with lots of new skills, stories and even romance. A generation later, they send their children here to absorb symphonic repertoire and have a chance for a meaningful experience.'

These are lofty aspirations worthy of atmosphere almost two miles above sea level. Breckenridge surpasses Kathmandu, Bogotá and Quito in altitude, and I'm betting there is more music in its hills. ●



Carl Topilow

TOPILOW: ANDREW GIBSON/ISTOCK; BELEN: JEFF KALININ/ISTOCK

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