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Facing the Music

Symphony fans are made, not born. That's why the PSO needs Edward Cumming.

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A steady, murmuring buzz usually fills the air in Heinz Hall during the moments just before a Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra performance. But on this particular Friday morning, the sound is a full-fledged cacophony. Then the lights go down, and the thousands of restless 8-year-olds who are here for the very first time squeal as one.

Excitement gives way to dignity -- a little, anyway -- as all the kids start furiously shushing each other. Their stern, high-pitched rasps are soon drowned out by the sonic groundswell of the musicians tuning their instruments. They finish, and for an instant there is silence.

And then a boy near the front coughs -- and then another, and another, and in the blink of an eye, one third of the audience is coughing happily, another third is giggling at the coughers, and the last third is turning beet-red from shushing the others a bit too vehemently.

Suddenly, Edward Cumming bounds onto the stage. The slim, movie-star-handsome conductor flashes a quick grin, turns to the orchestra, and without a word launches them into Haydn's Overture in D Major. The onslaught of music stuns the second-graders into true silence. A girl with a white bow in her hair pulls a pair of opera glasses from her dress and peeks through them at Cumming. Her neighbor whispers, "Let me see!"

A rousing string movement bursts forth, then resolves, inspiring four boys to applaud violently, thinking the piece is over. It's not. A minute later, another brief resolution is followed by more clapping; these guys *really* want to show some appreciation. They finally get their chance when Cumming slams the orchestra to an abrupt halt and turns to smile at the crowd.

"Hi," he says. After ascertaining that most of them haven't been to the symphony before, he casually asks, "Who knows who Thomas Jefferson was?" A sea of hands wave in the air to the sound of myriad "Ooo!"s. Cumming explains that Haydn wrote his music during Jefferson's time as president, and the kids are hooked, listening with the eagerness they usually reserve for those particularly nifty young substitute teachers who occasionally come along and remind them that boring ol' school can, in fact, be fun.

In a sense, that teacher figure is exactly who Cumming is. As the PSO's resident conductor, he leads the orchestra during education concerts like this one, as well as on community outreach concerts that take the music out of Heinz Hall and into the neighborhoods and suburbs. While music director Mariss Jansons is the face of the PSO to its sophisticated, adult audience, it's Cumming who embodies classical music to the young generation of Pittsburghers who, 20 or 30 years from now, either will or will not become the next sophisticated, adult audience. If he's charismatic enough, maybe they will.

This morning, he's doing just fine. The orchestra continues with a second Haydn piece, featuring a virtuoso piano solo by 10-year-old prodigy Kimberly Kong. When it's over, Cumming exclaims: "That was fantastic! How many of you play the piano?" Lots of hands. He grins roguishly at them. "Bet you're going to go home and practice today, aren't you?" They laugh in mixed despair and delight, many of them visibly wondering, *If I work really hard, could I be that fantastic too?*

Before beginning the final piece, Cumming introduces the instruments in the orchestra. He systematically has the musicians demonstrate all the strings, woodwinds, brasses and percussions, one at a time. But when the music kicks back in, none of the kids playing make-believe in their seats are sawing their arms back and forth like violinists or twiddling their fingers like flutists. No, they're all gently waving their hands in measured figure-eights of the wrist -- ticking off time like the conductor.

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What isn't make-believe is the decline in attendance the PSO has suffered in recent years. The Thursday night concert subscription series in particular has faltered. The PSO's response? Managing director Gideon Toeplitz announced in January that the Thursday night series will be canceled next season, and several concerts will be cut from the Friday, Saturday and Sunday series, leaving a total of 55 classical subscription shows, down from 72 this year. To fill the orchestra's schedule, the PSO plans to increase its emphasis on community outreach and education programs.

From the standpoint of the traditional, highbrow symphony buff, these programs might be imagined to distract the orchestra from its "real" mission: playing classical music for those who can truly appreciate it. But from a larger perspective, education and outreach are the only conceivable ways to ensure that the orchestra will thrive as it moves into the next century. Where will the PSO's new audiences come from if it doesn't seek them out and educate them itself?

"High school kids aren't always into classical music," says Lauren Sisenwain, a junior at Schenley High School, whose choir recently performed side by side with the PSO under Cumming at an outreach concert in Oakland. "This is a way to make them feel involved in the growth of classical music, no matter what kind of pop music they're into."

According to Suzanne Perrino, the PSO's director of education and outreach, the Schenley choir is the sort of success story the outreach program strives for. When the choir's first annual concert with the symphony took place three years ago, it consisted of some 40 students. Since then, it has more than doubled in size, and this year's concert culminated in a powerful performance of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" -- not only an overwhelming piece of music to listen to, but a very difficult one for neophyte singers to master.

"Ed Cumming pushes us to achieve," says Schenley choral director Rick Finkelstein. "He asked if my sopranos could hit an 'A', and I said, 'Yeah...?' He told me what he wanted to do, and I thought he was nuts."

Nuts or not, after long weeks of work, they did it. "We *became* the 'Ode to Joy,'" says freshman Kristin Sippl. "To lose yourself in a piece of music and join into something higher, even for two minutes, is an experience I wish I could share with everyone."

Working with the PSO makes all the difference in the world to students' perspective on music, says choir member Maxwell Sobolik: "I'd never taken a chorus class before, and I wasn't expecting to enjoy it much.

I've been surprised. I know my own abilities are pretty limited, but I'm proud to be a part, even a small part, of something this amazing."

This is the sort of passion teenagers rarely acquire second-hand from their parents. It requires interaction with the music.

"Mr. Post [Arthur Post, Cumming's predecessor] was very gracious when he worked with us," says Sisenwain of the first Schenley/PSO concert three years ago, "but I think he was more likely to tell us we sounded fine than to really push us to be better. Mr. Cumming is a lot more open and energetic about the music. He's very inspiring."

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At 40, Edward Cumming is a mere infant in the world of symphony conductors. Maybe that's why he works so well with children and teenagers: He can relate.

"I hear some teachers talking to their students," he says, "and I can't believe how condescending they are. Kids are *people*. They just happen to be young people."

Cumming is about the farthest thing imaginable from the cartoonish "mad maestro" stereotype; he seems to like people as much as he likes music. "What makes audiences tick?" he asks. "What do they respond to? What do they want to hear? It's something I'm very passionate about."

To him, "outreach" doesn't just mean extending the orchestra's geographical base. "At a typical concert at Heinz Hall, there's not much verbal communication between the stage and the audience," he says, though he notes Mariss Jansons -- whom he describes as far more in tune with the Pittsburgh public than former music director Lorin Maazel ever was -- has been successfully piercing that invisible wall lately. Cumming says this is vital: "I've found when I talk about the music beforehand, many more people come up afterward to tell me they enjoyed it."

That, in a nutshell, is what the PSO's education and outreach programs are about: increasing the number of people in the world who have the ability to enjoy classical music.

"My generation did not grow up listening to classical music," Cumming says, matter-of-fact. "We were listening to the Beatles, to Elvis. It's incumbent upon conductors to show people how to listen. How else are they going to know? If you show them that Beethoven's Fifth is all built on four notes, they'll get it. And the Ninth -- everyone knows the 'Ode to Joy,' but it's 40 minutes in. What do they do until then if they don't know what they're listening to? All you have to do is take three minutes in the beginning, play some bits and pieces to show them that the Ninth is built on just two notes, and say, 'That's it. That will get you to the 'Ode to Joy'.'"

The look in his eye is intense. "We have to take some gambles," he says, "not just play to the audience we know will keep coming." If the orchestra doesn't continue its efforts to embrace those who aren't already regular PSO subscribers, he says, the result will be simple: "The audience will pass by."