

An orchestra doesn't often get to play Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" theme with the entire audience joining in.

Tacoma Symphony's annual Simply Symphonic schools concerts came with a big difference this year — an interactive program called Link Up, organized by Carnegie Hall's Weill Music Institute.

The program was brought to the orchestra by its new music director, Sarah Ioannides, who conducted her enormous ensemble with obvious delight.

"The more the audience participates, the more it works," Ioannides said backstage after the second of Tuesday's two concerts.

Nearly 4,300 students from more than 70 schools and 11 districts are participating in this year's concerts Tuesday and Thursday. The Link Up program, called "The Orchestra Sings," focuses on melody.

Greg Youtz, composer and Pacific Lutheran University composition professor, swept onstage to introduce the orchestra and emcee the concert.

It quickly became clear why Link Up is so different from traditional kids' classical concerts and why it has become so popular, with more than 70 orchestras around the world joining in the 30-year-old Carnegie program.

Link Up mixes music with casual banter between stage performers (Youtz, Ioannides, singer James Brown and a few of the musicians themselves), simplified explanations of music theory (how a melody is constructed, for example) and big projected images that illustrate concepts (a chord as an exclamation mark composed of four note-names) and musical stories.

Its smooth blend of theater, visuals and music reflects the multimedia culture of today's children.

But the most important part of Link Up is the fact that the audience gets to play along with the orchestra.

In January, the orchestra offered a teacher training session with curriculum and CDs, sending each child books full of tunes to learn and musical concepts to cover in class.

Filing into the theater, teachers handed out recorders — a few children brought violins — and the excitement was palpable.

Finally, after section leaders introduced their instruments over an undercurrent of string sound, the kids got to play.

They filled the Pantages first with a sweet rendition of "Simple Gifts," then — after some discussion about what makes up a melody — the famous second-movement theme of Dvorák's "New World" Symphony and Beethoven's "Ode to Joy."

They got to pick out which instruments should play various parts of Stravinsky's "Firebird" opening (before hearing the original) and sing along with a folk song and a bright Spanish samba.

"I thought it was amazing," said Dana Hicks of Grant Elementary. "I really liked the singers. I'm really inspired because I also play the violin."

“It’s designed to be educational as much as entertaining,” Ioannides said. “It gets students to understand how melody gets passed around through the orchestra, and simplifies it enough that they can grasp easily how composition takes place.

“... It’s also a very good curriculum that gives opportunities for teachers to teach at different levels — in the Dvorák, for instance, kids can just learn one note or play the whole melody.”

For Megan Oberfield, a music teacher at Browns Point Elementary and a professional singer and director, the Link Up program has good and bad points.

“I’m of two minds about it,” said Oberfield, who has brought her fifth-graders to Simply Symphonic for years. “On the one hand I want my students to be good audience members and listeners. It’s a very visual culture now, with music as just background.

“But, as career preparation, (participation) does teach them skills they might need. Kids now are taught to be passive consumers with short attention spans. (Link Up) does a good job of bridging the gap between learning to be good listeners and meeting them where their skills already are.”

But for a lot of kids, the biggest benefit of Simply Symphonic remains the same: the chance to hear an orchestra concert.

The TSO keeps costs low for schools, and offers scholarships if needed, supporting the program with grants and sponsorship. And judging from the enthusiastic singing and loud applause at the end of Tuesday’s first show, it’s an inspiring experience.

“Many of these kids have never been to a concert in here before,” Ioannides said. “And the bonus is, they get to play as well.”

Rosemary Ponnekanti: 253-597-8568 [rosemary.ponnekanti@thenewstribune.com](mailto:rosemary.ponnekanti@thenewstribune.com) [@rose\\_ponnekanti](https://www.facebook.com/rose_ponnekanti)

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