

■ CONDUCTING INTEREST

Brockton Symphony's Cohler a maestro for a new era

■ The music director has overseen the symphony's transformation from a volunteer enterprise to a unit composed of mostly professional musicians.

By **Carla DeFord**

SPECIAL TO THE ENTERPRISE

When Jonathan Cohler took over as music director of the Brockton Symphony Orchestra 10 years ago, he knew the ensemble could not survive without undergoing a complete transformation.

Jonathan Cohler

Although founded in 1947 as a volunteer community enterprise, by the time Cohler inherited the orchestra from former music director Francisco Noya, it had only 25 volunteers. Knowing that he needed a minimum of 40 musicians for smaller concerts and as many as 75 performers for the kind of challenging repertoire he envisioned programming in the future, Cohler decided there was only one thing to do: he had to start hiring professional musicians.

"Ultimately, over the next five years or so, the orchestra will become completely professional," according to Cohler. "Not because we're kicking anybody out, but because our volunteer players, who have been with us for 30 to 50 years, are not going to be around forever. The orchestra cannot survive by shrinking; if it shrinks, it dies."

With more professional musicians comes increased budget; during Cohler's tenure the costs of the Brockton Symphony Orchestra have risen from approximately \$30,000 to \$200,000 per year.

Corporate contributions have underwritten this growth, and for the past two seasons Harbor One Credit Union has been the lead sponsor of the orchestra.

Now Cohler and the symphony Board of Directors are actively seeking others. "We need to establish relationships with major sponsors if we're going to continue," Cohler noted. "That's our biggest challenge."

The symphony has received considerable support from Kenneth Feinberg, Brockton native and special master of the federal 9/11 Victim Compensation Fund. In recognition of Feinberg's gift, the annual symphony awards concert has been named after him. At this concert, winners of the concerto competition receive their awards and perform solo works with piano.

"Our concerto competition is the now the biggest one in the Boston area," said Cohler. Generous cash awards (which will be increased next year) and numerous performing opportunities, have helped make the symphony concerto competition so successful. Performing at the Feinberg Awards Concert this year were eight winners: one first prize, three second prizes, two third prizes, and two honorable mentions. "The kids who compete are so talented that I've tried to give out as many prizes as possible," Cohler said.

In keeping with that philosophy, Cohler created the Classics for Kids prize, which recognizes the best player in the concerto competition age 13 or younger. The winner performs at the Classics for Kids concert. These concerts are now major events that feature face painting, costumes, an instrumental petting zoo, and a post-concert party.

Cohler considers both the concerto competition and the Classics for Kids concert educational activities that are crucial to the mission of the orchestra. The symphony also does after-school programs, gives free tickets to inner-city youth, and has a discount ticket program.

To further cultivate his audience, Cohler has introduced another innovation: concerts at Jordan Hall in Boston.

"The best way for the orchestra



THE ENTERPRISE FILES

CORY PESATURO, left, of Cumberland, R.I., plays the accordion next to conductor Jonathan Cohler during the Brockton Symphony Orchestra's annual Holiday Pops concert held in the Brockton High School Nelson Fine Arts Auditorium in 2003.

to grow is to find and play for new markets," Cohler observed. Several years ago, the symphony performed Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 at Jordan Hall to great acclaim.

"It was the most successful concert in the history of the orchestra, and it attracted a 100 percent new audience," Cohler noted. "Since then we've done four performances at Jordan Hall, and they've all been tremendous successes."

How does Cohler choose repertoire?

"I try to program new and bigger pieces that the orchestra has never done before — to push the envelope," said the maestro. Examples of ambitious programming have been Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring," Mahler's Symphony No. 2, and Shostakovich's Symphony No. 10. Of course, programming is highly dependent on budget.

"Music costs money," Cohler noted, "and different music costs

War Memorial Building.

It was former mayor Jack Yunits who made the decision to turn the largely unused building into a performing arts center. Cohler appreciates the excellent acoustics of the building, but notes that more work needs to be done to accommodate a large orchestra.

"For the Shostakovich this year," said Cohler, "we were jam-packed on the stage."

In addition to directing the symphony, Cohler, who is a virtuoso clarinetist, travels the world, conducting, concertizing, and teaching. A faculty member of the Boston Conservatory, New England Conservatory, and the Longy School of Music, Cohler runs the International Woodwind Festival at the Boston Conservatory and is assistant conductor of the New England Conservatory Youth Philharmonic Orchestra. He also owns Ongaku Records, which produces

award-winning classical-music recordings, and coaches several chamber music groups for national competitions.

"I go to places like China, South America, and Europe a lot," said Cohler. "I'm usually headed somewhere."

On April 23 at 3:30 p.m., however, he'll be on the podium at the War Memorial Building leading the symphony in a classic concert for kids, featuring young cellist Jonah Park Ellsworth. It may be the last concert of the season, but for Cohler and his orchestra, it's the dawn of a new era.

The symphony Classics for Kids concert takes place on April 23 at 3:30 p.m. at the War Memorial Building, 156 West Elm Street. Tickets can be purchased by calling 508-588-3841 or order online at www.etix.com. Adults: \$20 floor, \$25 balcony; children 12 and under: \$10.

different amounts of money because it uses a different number of players."

A case in point is the upcoming Classics for Kids concert. Originally, Cohler suggested playing Prokofiev's "Peter and the Wolf," a well-loved piece that would not be too costly. The board, however, was enthusiastic about programming John Williams's "Suite from 'Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone.'" The latter piece requires what Cohler described as a "huge orchestra," so the budget will rise proportionately.

One expense Cohler does not have to factor into his overall costs is rent for the auditorium because the city has given the orchestra free use of the recently renovated