CONDUCTING INTEREST

Brockton Symphony’s Cohler a maestro for a new era

By Carla DeFord

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.

Although founded in 1947 as a volunteer community enterprise, by the time Cohler inherited the orchestra from former music director Francisco Moro, 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 larger events, Cohler decided there was one thing to do: he had to start hiring professional musicians.

The orchestra has received considerable support from Kenne- th Feinberg, Brockton native and special master of the federal 9/11 Victim Compensation Fund. In recognition of Feinberg’s gift, the annual symphony auditions con- cert has been named after him. At this concert, winners of the concor- dian competition receive their awards and perform solo works with piano.

Your concerts competition is the now the biggest one in the Brockton area,” said Cohler Gener- ous cash awards (which will be in- creased next year) and numerous performing opportunities, have helped make the symphony more successful. Performing at the Feinberg Awards Concert this year were eight winners: one first prize, two second prizes, two third prizes, and two honorable men- tions. “The kids who compete are so talented that I’ve tried to give them 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 concertos competition age 13 or younger. The winner performs at the Classics for Kids concert. These concerts are new major events that feature face painting, costumes, an instru- mental petting zoo, and a post-con- cert party.

Cohler considers both the con- certo competition and the Classics for Kids educational activi- ties that are crucial to the mission of the orchestra. “The symphony al- so does after-school programs, gives free use of the recently renovated auditorium because it uses the excellent acoustics of the largely unused building into a performing arts center. Cohler ap- preciates the excellent acoustics of the building, but notes that more work needs to be done to accommo- date a large orchestra.

“For the Shostakovich this year,” said Cohler, “we were jampacked on the stage.”

In addition to directing the symphony, Cohler is a virtu- ose clarinetist, travels the world, conducting, concertizing, and teaching. A faculty member of the Boston Conservatory, New Eng- land 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 Phil- harmonic Orchestra. He also owns Ongslak Records, which produces award-winning classical-music recordings, and coaches several chamber music groups for nation- al competitions.

“I get to places like China, South America, and Europe a lot,” said Cohler. “I’m usually headed some- where.”

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 Build- ing, 156 West Elm Street. Tickets can be purchased by calling 508-588-3841 or online at www.etix.com. Adults: $20 floor, $25 balcony; children 12 and un- der: $10.

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

JONATHAN COHLER

CORY PESATURO, left, of Cumberland, R.I., plays the accordion next to conduc- tor Jonathan Cohler during the Brockton Symphony Orchestra’s annual Holiday Pops concert held in the Brockton High School Nelson Fine Arts Au- ditorium in 2003.