Taking up the baton

Inside the Baltimore Chamber Orchestra Conducting Seminar

By ELIZABETH NOVEMBER
For The Baltimore Sun

Some musicians are born conductors. Markand Thakar, music director of the Baltimore Chamber Orchestra, is one of them.

He remembers racing an LLF for a Christmas present at the age of 5. “It was, ‘Conductor your own orchestra.’ It had a little red baton and I remember promising to turn pages and conducting the record players.

Other musicians, though, might not develop an interest in the art until much later on, when they notice their potential or after they’re already established careers as performers.

But picking up conducting isn’t as straightforward as picking up an instrument. The latter for a full-sized ensemble can include as many as 80 different performances. How do aspiring conductors actually practice?

In 2018, Markand Thakar offered a solution by hosting the first Baltimore Chamber Orchestra Conducting Seminar. Students could buy hand-conducting lessons directly from the maestro, Alexei Kogan, who would lead them through a professional ensemble for just over four days.

Since then, the seminar has grown to include two weekend sessions that are open to anyone interested in conducting. Each session is held in the fall and spring, and includes four days at the University of Maryland’s music school.

Over the past year, Nicholas Finch has attended the seminar and has even been invited to conduct one of the sessions. He recently returned to the studio and helped Thakar get ready for the second session of the year.

In a recent seminar, Thakar taught the audience how to conduct with clarity and focus. He showed them how to conduct a piece while still being able to hear the orchestra.

The seminar is designed to give students a hands-on understanding of what it takes to be a conductor. The four-day sessions include lectures, rehearsals, and performance opportunities.

The seminar is open to anyone interested in conducting, regardless of their musical background.

In addition to the seminar, Thakar also offers private lessons and masterclasses to help students develop their conducting skills.

“I think this is true for playing an instrument as well. The maestro is learning what to do,” said Finch. “It’s really easy to fall into bad habits and then find out that you’re not doing what the music says. That’s why having a conductor is so important.”

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