

# The Boston Globe

## White House honors Boston's Project STEP



JOSH REYNOLDS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

At Symphony Hall, (from left) Jernyida George, 13, and STEP students Trinity Dickson, 9, and Angelina Wallace, 9, look over various period instruments.

**By James Sullivan**

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The curly-haired boy, stuffed into a vest and tie, gazed up at the glass case. Inside hung some rare instruments from the Boston Symphony Orchestra's collection. The little boy's eyes lighted

up in wonder. Then he turned and sprinted toward his father, clenching his fists, and miming a celebration like a receiver in the end zone.

By then the actual celebration last Monday evening was winding down. Families, teachers, and supporters of the Boston youth classical music development program known as Project STEP had gathered at the BSO's Higginson Hall to mark a big score: The 32-year-old institution has just won a National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award, presented last month by first lady Michelle Obama at the White House.

Sokki Chan-Laurent, 5, the boy in the vest, will soon apply for the program's introduction to music for kindergartners, said his father, Pascal Laurent. Sokki's sister, Suubi, 8, is in her third year as a cello student there.

Laurent came to Massachusetts from Haiti 15 years ago. "They have an opportunity I didn't have, both of them," he said, adding that he will require the children to play an instrument until they're 18. "I'm not going to let it fly."

The presidential recognition gave the program's faculty and leadership a rare chance to reflect on their legacy of producing well-rounded students and, in many cases, professional musicians, from minority families. William Moyer, the retired BSO manager who first conceived the program in the early 1980s, said the award was just a culmination of the ongoing rewards Project STEP staffers get from working with the students.

"There's been so many changes to our society," he said, "and those changes have been wonderful."

Moyer initially got the idea for Project STEP (Strings Training and Education Program) after being assigned to find qualified orchestra candidates of color. After a futile cross-country search, he proposed that the institution create its own system to develop a more diverse pool of applicants.



Steven E. Purcell

Michelle Obama (with Ajani Boyd) gave Project STEP its National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award last month.

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With ground-floor sponsorship from the BSO, New England Conservatory, and Boston University’s College of Fine Arts, STEP has developed an extensive network of donors over the years. From an initial class of seven in 1982, the program now supports about 100 kindergartners each year in an introduction to music course. About half that number from grades 1-12 study an instrument in the program, taking weekly lessons and performing and attending concerts. In recent years, the model has been replicated in cities including Atlanta, Dallas, and Baltimore.

Families pay \$350 in annual tuition for their child, and the organization makes financial aid available for those who need it. STEP provides the instruments. When the students graduate, they can choose to purchase theirs with a no-interest loan.

According to administrators, every STEP graduate over the program's three decades has gone on to college or conservatory. What's more, they say 60 percent of those graduates are now professionally involved in music.

At last week's event, the centerpiece of the evening was a short program of compositions interpreted by students: Bach's "Ave Maria" and the classic tango "La Cumparsita," both performed by ensembles, followed by a virtuoso turn from teenage violinist Tristan Flores playing Paganini.

The students performed in front of two festively decorated Christmas trees, with a life-size cardboard cutout of the first lady leaning against a pillar to the right of the performance stand. Proud parents crowded to the center of the room, holding up their phones for pictures.

At the White House last month, executive director Mary Jaffee and double bass player Ajani Boyd, 11, accepted the award on behalf of the program. Boyd, a seventh-grader at Boston Latin, said he was asked to make the trip to Washington on the day he turned 11.

"I said, 'Oh, that's an amazing birthday present,'" he recalled.

Of 362 organizations nominated for the National Arts and Humanities Youth Program award this year, just 12 (about 3 percent) were honored at the White House. Speaking to the gathering at Symphony Hall, Jaffee put the award in perspective: By comparison, she said, nearly 6 percent of Harvard applicants were accepted this year.

Despite the advances made by the project and its peers, the overall figures for minorities in orchestras remain small. When the American Symphony Orchestra League conducted a survey in 2005, it identified just 237 African-American members — 2 percent of all players — in the 176 orchestras that responded.

But Mariana Green-Hill, a Project STEP and Juilliard alumna who now serves on the faculty, said she has seen considerable progress in the past decade.

"So many people in my age range are definitely finding their own niche or creating their own footprint in the classical music realm," she said. "The difference isn't very big on the major stage, but there's more of an outlet for people to express themselves," from churches and chamber music ensembles to the YouTube Symphony Orchestra.

While pleased about those gains, parents of students in the program say Project STEP's benefits extend beyond musical training.

"It teaches them a way of studying that's very focused and directed," said Benz Theodore, a software engineer from Watertown who has two children in the program. "You can apply it to brain surgery."

Theodore first learned of Project STEP back in the 1980s, when his brother participated. He auditioned, too, but didn't make the cut.

Many parents noted that their own experiences while growing up convinced them to pursue Project STEP for their kids.

“I tell people I played a little viola, but I didn’t have a mother like me, so it was easy to quit,” said Yvonne Brooks, who was there with her daughter Njioma Grevious, 15, a violinist. Njioma’s older sister, Njeri, a Project STEP graduate, is a sophomore at Yale studying applied mathematics. The girls sometimes perform with their brother in a chamber trio.

A single mother, Brooks moved her family to a rental in Newton to ensure the kids superior public schooling. Making ends meet hasn’t been easy: “Honey, let me tell you, the apartment is 57 degrees right now because the oil is too much,” she said.

But the payoff comes in seeing her children thrive musically and academically. Njioma said she used to cry before or after a performance, but her years in the program have given her a sense of confidence that has spilled over into other parts of her life, such as public speaking. Making a school presentation, she recently argued in favor of classical music over the pop music her friends all love.

“They’re all about pop music,” she said, “and I’m like, You guys are weird.” She prefers Shostakovich, whose Symphony No. 5 she performed with the Boston Philharmonic Youth Orchestra.

You can find the recording on iTunes, she noted, beaming.