

NH

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Cox is one of 20 conductors in a field of 560 – one of five American composers and the only African-American.

Cox, at age 36, defies tradition with a nuanced style of conducting that seems more mature than his age. With neither wasted movement nor needless flamboyance, he enters the music so seamlessly you cannot take your eyes off him. With a presence combining the poise of a dancer with the insight of a French horn player, Cox was in such command that the entire orchestra seemed to be an extension of his body. One minute he was a maestro holding court; then a storyteller surprised by the turn of phrase; the next moment, he seemed like a child at Christmas, hanging on the precipice of each note as if hearing it for the first time. One instant his feet seemed to leave the stage – the next moment he was as still as a zen master, a poet floating through lyrical passages, then a painter at the easel.

The evening's unlikely pairing of Cox with Hall-Tompkins was actually serendipity, but the result of planting the right seeds by Symphony NH Executive Director Marc Thayer.

No one understands the traditions – and conventions – of classical music better than Thayer, who joined Symphony NH in July 2016. Thayer not only embraces diversity – he has lived it – viewing classical music and America through the lenses of other cultures for most of his career.

An Eastman School of Music graduate with a Masters in Violin Performance, Thayer most recently served as deputy director of the Association of American Voices, a Cultural Diplomacy organization with whom he has performed and taught in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Ghana, Togo, Thailand, Burma and the Gaza Strip, in Kurdistan, northern Iraq and in Beirut, Lebanon. He has worked in Liberia; the Virgin Islands; Bolivia; performed with the American Russian Young Artists Orchestra; the Opera Festival of Heidelberg, Germany; the Orquesta Superior of Cordoba, Spain; music festivals in France – and spent a good portion of his early years performing with the New World Symphony.

Last Saturday, Thayer welcomed the audience by saying, "I am proud to be living in a city that knows that there are no inferior cultures,



Courtesy photo by KELLY HALL-TOMPKINS

AT LEFT: Kelly Hall-Tompkins coaches dancer Jesse Kovarsky in the "Fiddler on the Roof."

AT RIGHT: Hall-Tompkins shares a moment with Kovarsky before the show.

no inferior countries." Thayer acknowledged the slow rate of change in the classical music world, saying, "It was not until 1970 that rampant gender bias in orchestras was addressed through blind auditions that are now standard practice."

In 1970, women composed less than 5 percent of players in the top five symphonies. Blind auditions enhanced women's chances of advancing beyond preliminary rounds by 50 percent, resulting in a 25-46 percent increase in the percentage of females in orchestras since 1970. Diversity is not always obvious. Thayer said Symphony NH members also represent diverse backgrounds – Russian, Romanian, Polish, German, Austrian, Japanese, Korean and Chinese.

Thayer defies tradition at every turn, seeking out new and sometimes unorthodox venues to spread classical music – from the Hunt Community to Holman Stadium, from Canterbury Shaker Village and the Lebanon Opera House to the upcoming St. Gaudens exhibition at the Currier Gallery of Art, and has considered bringing classical music to an airport hangar.

Thayer's global perspective infuses the search for the next Symphony NH music director. Thayer said, "We are still in the classical music world living out the bias of a 19th century European tradition. Until recently, it was considered that all conductors must be European, not American." In fact, a 2010 study of demographics on orchestral conductors showed that out of 52 conductors, 44 were white; one black; four Hispanic; three Asian; only five were female.

It is curious that though the violin spawned five centuries of tradition, it was itself an unlikely gift of migration. In medieval France, the secular music of lutes, rebecs and veilles played by travelling minstrels co-existed with the monks' plainchant. But around 1200, the church banished the troubadours who fled for their lives along the same west-

ward routes of pilgrims heading to Spain's Santiago de Compostella. In Spain, they found 30 years under the benevolent rule of King Alfonso X whose peaceable cosmopolitan court included Jews, Muslims and Christians, and the musical intertwining of three cultures.

But two centuries later, on July 30, 1492, the Spanish Inquisition and Father Tomas de Torquemada orchestrated the sudden mass expulsion of the entire Jewish community – 200,000 Sephardic (Spanish) Jews. In Cremona, Italy, 1499 census records pinpoint the arrival of one Sephardic Jew Giovanni Leonardo da Martinengo, a lute maker, who by 1526 listed two Amati brothers working in his shop. Andrea Amati would have been 21 years old. Something magical happened – the training Andrea Amati received from a Spanish Jewish refugee in his Italian shop resulted in Amati inventing the earliest known violin. Not so surprisingly, the violin itself is a montage of refugee parts from different instruments – the Renaissance (French) fiddle or veille; the Italian lira da braccio and the Asian rebec.

Refugees and gypsies – like Tevye in Fiddler on the Roof escaping the Zsarist Russia – have carried fiddles under their coats and in their carts for centuries – often as the family's prized possession, the portable stringed instrument closest to the human voice, held close to the heart, a potent box of air and strings that touches emotion in the deep recesses of the soul.

Mary Jordan, Symphony NH trustee said, "Music unites us. It doesn't matter what language we speak, where we come from, what our circumstances are. It has the power to change us – to expand our minds and open our hearts."

If the recent Beethoven concert is any indication, Symphony NH – a cadre of excellent professionals led by a visionary in Marc Thayer – is set to soar into new territories, transforming tradition into a music all their own.