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### YOUTH SYMPHONY SERVED BY SOLOIST'S EXPERIENCE

*RICHARD SCHEININ , Mercury News*

While in San Francisco last month for a series of performances, cellist and conductor Mstislav Rostropovich enjoyed a backstage visit with Camilla **Kolchinsky**, an old friend from the classical music circuit in Russia. "I hear Barantschik's playing with your orchestra," he told her. **Kolchinsky** beamed: Oh, that the maestro should know about her good fortune!

Not to mention the good fortune of **Kolchinsky's** 85 young charges in the El Camino Youth Symphony who will perform twice this weekend with violinist Alexander Barantschik, the Russian-born San Francisco Symphony concertmaster and world-class soloist. Yes, there is war in the world, yet here is something life-affirming: A master musician who makes music with children.

On stages in Redwood City and Palo Alto, in benefit concerts to mark the youth symphony's 40th anniversary, Barantschik will stand beside **Kolchinsky** and play Prokofiev's Violin Concerto No. 1. It is a singing, ringing, life-affirming piece that he has performed previously as soloist with the London Symphony Orchestra.

"It's the first time he's ever performed with a youth orchestra," said Cathy Spieth, the orchestra's executive director, as well as mother of its principal violist, 18-year-old Alison Spieth. "I hope it doesn't shock him too badly."

Not at all.

In fact, Barantschik was quietly pleased at Thursday night's dress rehearsal at the Cubberley Theater in Palo Alto. He walked on stage, shook hands with youth symphony co-concertmaster Timothy Wong, 18, smiled and waved to the other kids, and then got down to business, playing Prokofiev's keening melodies and bouncing balalaika rhythms.

Young persons' guide

As he executed ecstatic trills and dizzying double-stops, Barantschik turned toward the children to guide them with his bowing and with his eyes. The young people didn't play flawlessly -- this is a rough score, after all -- but the performance improved over the hour, and when it was finished, Barantschik expressed satisfaction.

"Even without having much experience, they can feel the music," he said. "What is most important is for young kids to be together, to play with a professional, wonderful conductor, and to play such beautiful music. To me it's enough to see their eyes."

And Cathy Spieth was happy and proud: "The kids were wonderful," she said. "They were affected by the presence of a great artist, and they rose to the occasion."

**Kolchinsky** met Barantschik through Leonid Gesin, another Russian expatriate, who is a violist in the San Francisco Symphony and occasional coach for the El Camino Youth Symphony.

Years ago, Gesin and Barantschik played together in the Leningrad Philharmonic. When Barantschik left London two years ago to join conductor Michael Tilson Thomas with the San Francisco Symphony, the "Russian connection" went into effect. It wasn't long before **Kolchinsky** met the new San Francisco Symphony concertmaster

and invited Barantschik to perform with her kids.

Long ago in Leningrad, Barantschik, 49, was himself the concertmaster of a youth orchestra. And like the teenagers of the El Camino Youth Symphony, he had an early brush with greatness. At age 16, he was introduced to David Oistrakh, one of the 20th century's greatest concert violinists. "I was very nervous," he recalled. "I played for him in his hotel room, and I will never forget this evening. He was a very very nice, charming man, and I remember that he asked me one question," Barantschik said, laughing.

"He said, 'Do you really love playing the violin?' And I said, 'Yes!'

"Yes, I still love it," he said, anticipating the next question. Yet all these years later, Barantschik is "still trying to catch this ideal sound," he said. "You hear it. It's in your spirit. It's in your soul. But it's always ahead of you."

Mitch Hoffman, 17, a trumpeter with the youth symphony, sensed Thursday that Barantschik was chasing something way "past the notes and rhythms."

"It feels like we were feeding off his playing," violinist Christopher Cheng, 18, said after the rehearsal. "It's like a spark."

"He is extraordinary," said Rochelle Nguyen, 14, the orchestra's associate concertmaster, who paid close attention to Barantschik's bowing and planned to incorporate a few new things into her practicing.

And Barantschik, it turns out, had been more than a musical model: "He's humble; he's not conceited," said Jessica Kuo, 15, an oboist.

Such responses are precisely what **Kolchinsky** hoped to elicit from her musicians by bringing in Barantschik, who has performed alongside conductors Pierre Boulez, Seiji Ozawa, Leonard Bernstein and Sir Georg Solti, to name a few.

#### Knowing leadership

**Kolchinsky** is herself a conductor of prominence, having led such orchestras as the London Philharmonic and the Israel Philharmonic. She understands the uplifting effect a great soloist can have on an orchestra, and each year she recruits top-notch artists to perform with the Peninsula teenagers. Past soloists have included pianists Jon Nakamatsu and Vladimir Viardo, winners of the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, and Eugene Levinson, principal bassist with the New York Philharmonic.

The idea is to give the young people "a goal to reach, an ideal," said **Kolchinsky**. "It's a very strong stimulation to them to practice and practice and practice, and to reach a very high level, if not in music, then in some other subject."

As the concerts with Barantschik approach, she has high hopes. On a practical level, **Kolchinsky** hopes the performances will raise \$25,000 to shore up the youth symphony's \$450,000 budget at a time when foundation and corporate support for the arts is lagging. At the spiritual level, particularly now as bombs are dropping on Iraq, she hopes the music will "make peace inside the soul."

Barantschik agreed: "With the music," he said, "we try to soothe all these wounds in people's souls and try to give them some pleasure, some beauty, in a world which has so many horrors."

Alexander Barantschik with El Camino Youth Symphony

Redwood City: 7:30 p.m. Saturday; Messiah Lutheran Church, 1835 Valota Road

Palo Alto: 7:30 p.m. Sunday; Spangenberg Theatre, Gunn High School, 780 Arastradero Road  
Tickets: \$25, \$15 students/seniors; (650) 327-2611, [www.ecys.org](http://www.ecys.org).

#### Illustration:Photo

PHOTO: TERRENCE MCCARTHY

Long ago in Leningrad, Alexander Barantschik was himself the concertmaster of a youth orchestra. He's now a world-class violin soloist.

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