



## **Episode 77: Empowering the Next Generation Through Music with Raúl Gómez-Rojas**

Christine Goodner:

Welcome to episode 77 in the interviews I've done over the couple of years I've been doing this podcast, many professional musicians and music educators have talked about getting their start in music through a school or community-based program, and I'm always reminded over and over again how important these programs are. So many children and people of all ages would not have access to the powerful experience of learning music and being part of an ensemble and all the wonderful gifts that that gives us without them.

Today's episode was prompted by an organization called Podcast Aon, which encourages podcasters to center a podcast around a nonprofit organization. And when I decided I wanted to participate, I knew I wanted to share an organization local to me, but with a message that resonates everywhere. I'm very excited to share the work and speak to the musical director today of the Metropolitan Youth Symphony based in Portland, Oregon. And today we'll be speaking with Raul Gomez Rojas. For those of you not local to me, you're going to hear great discussion about ensemble playing and the power of music in young people's lives that will apply to all of us. And I also hope this episode inspires you to get involved where you live, donate if you're able, or get connected to an organization where your child can learn music. All right, everyone. I'm excited this week to be talking to Raul Gomez Rojas, and this is a special episode highlighting a music organization that's making a difference in the community. I'm excited for our conversation today,

Raul, thanks for being here.

Raúl Gómez-Rojas:

Thank you for having me, Christine.

Christine Goodner:

I always love people to start by just sharing a little bit about who you are and what you do in the world of music.

Raúl Gómez-Rojas:

Sure, sure. I am Raul Gomez Rajas, as you said. I am the music director of the Metropolitan Youth Symphony here in Portland. It blew my mind the other day to realize that this is my ninth season with MYS. I started in the fall of 2016, and time has flown by and I am very proud of the work that Metropolitan Youth Symphony to in the community. And Portland has become home for my wife and I now. We have a 6-year-old daughter, Alma, who is now learning to play the violin too. So yeah, I feel very lucky to do the work that I do with this wonderful organization.

Christine Goodner:

I'm excited to talk about that. We talked before I hit record that this your organization I played in high school. This was my youth symphony growing up, and then I have some students that are involved now in Hillsborough, Oregon here where I live, which is a suburb of Portland for those who don't know, and it just, yeah, the organization really holds a special place in my heart too. It's so important in our community.

Raúl Gómez-Rojas:

Yeah, full circle kind of thing. You have having your own students at NYS.

Christine Goodner:

Yes. Yes. And here in Hillsborough where I live, there's not orchestra in the schools, so it's I think extra important for students to have an opportunity to play in an ensemble, so we can Talk About that as we get going. Can you share, maybe for those who are not as familiar, what does your role as music director look like? What does a music director do in an organization like NYS?

Raúl Gómez-Rojas:

Sure. Yeah. Okay. Well, my job has several parts to it. I conduct our most advanced full orchestra that we call MYS, symphony Orchestra, and a subset of string players from that group, an advanced string orchestra that we call Misfits, MYS fits. And that's to me, part of the core of my role, right week after week, I'm working directly with these young musicians in rehearsals, but then we have many ensembles, more than just the one full orchestra. We have 15 ensembles altogether, including our groups in Hillsborough, as you mentioned, our groups in Portland. So we have a really fantastic team of conductors who work with these other groups, so I get to work with them also pretty closely. And at the same time, I work on overseeing the artistic aspect of everything that MIS does. Also, including our programs, like our Beginning strings programs. I'm sure we'll talk about those a little bit.

Music theory, everything we do that is beyond ensemble playing also falls under my supervision, long-term planning for the organization also artistically how, and it's really not just me, of course, it's part of a team, but how we craft the vision for MYS into the future. This is our 50th anniversary, so it's a really exciting time for us to also celebrate what MYS has done in the last five decades, but also look into the future as we imagine the ways in which MYS will continue to grow and evolve. I get to work with great conductors and great young musicians and great people at the office, a wonderful board of directors as well.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. Thanks for sharing that. I think some people have not had that look behind the scenes of what else goes on in addition to conducting and working with the students. Yeah. Super interesting.

Raúl Gómez-Rojas:

Sure. Yeah, A bit of a mystery sometimes. Yes. Yes.

Christine Goodner:

What prompted me to reach out when I was thinking about doing a special episode about community and community outreach and a music program is the Beginning Strings program, which was not around when I was part of MYS way back in the Day . I'm very excited about what that program is doing. I wonder if you could tell people a little bit about that.

Raúl Gómez-Rojas:

Sure. Yes. Our Beginning Strings program has become increasingly important for us, and it does precede me. It started before I joined MYS, and it started as a weekly group class at our rehearsal site for kids to get started, kids with no previous experience in music. It was meant to be a place where they could gain the first year or two of experience needed to join our entry level string orchestra. And in the last nine years, that program has grown in several ways. One of them is that we started to branch out and create partnerships with schools, organizations in the portal metro area to create new beginning strings programs in those locations. Eventually, also, we went out to Hillsborough, thanks to our friend Dan Boshart, who at the time was the music teacher at Lin Street Elementary.

But then we also have grown this program by expanding what we do with the students. So it went from being just a weekly group class to what it is now, which is students do meet weekly for a group class, but each individual student gets a private lesson each week as part of the program. And then because part of the goal of this is to give those kids this initial exposure to strength playing so they can make it into our youngest group. We realize once these kids make it into that group, we need to still be there for them beyond displaying in the ensemble. So it's been a few years now that every single graduate of our Beginning Strings program that enters our ensembles, they keep getting weekly private lessons

For free for as long as their students at MYS. Right. So the concept is yes, to get these kids started. Primarily, these are kids who have no music access in their schools or very limited access to music education, or the families might not be in a financial situation such that they can pay for private lessons, which are pretty expensive. We provide instruments as well to all these kids. And we've also expanded, by the way, from violin to also viola and cello, and we're really proud of these kids, and our teachers are just fantastic. They're really magicians. I know you work with young students as well, and I have great admiration and respect for people who so passionately and so skillfully work with beginners. It really kind of blows my mind as a fellow music educator, but now also as a parent of a 6-year-old who has been just got started a few months ago. So it's been really cool to see the growth of those students and the dedication of our teachers.

Christine Goodner:

I didn't realize that the graduates from that program will continue to get those music lessons. I think that's really great. I think there's a lot of programs that offer exposure, as you said, but then that only gets us so far, I think, without the extra care and attention. Right,

Raúl Gómez-Rojas:

Right. And truly, that's the difference maker, that weekly individual lesson for not only how quickly, but also how well a student can make progress with their technique, with their musicianship. It's really not enough to just go to orchestra every week. I mean, that also brings benefits, of course, but for a student

to really realize their full potential, I think those individual lessons are really important, and we're proud to provide that for these kids as well.

Christine Goodner:

I think that's great. I can really figure out how does this child learn best? How do I keep them motivated? What are they not quite understanding, but they don't even know how to tell me they don't understand it in a bigger group? Things like that.

Raúl Gómez-Rojas:

And I feel like in the last maybe 15, 20 years with really as educators come to understand that each kids are different from each other, learning styles can be very different. So this individualized instruction is all the more important.

Christine Goodner:

Sure. Because some students might thrive in a big group and it's fine, but there's a lot of students that will not get exactly what they need there. And so yeah, it's really important – that individual intention is great. So I think I wanted to ask you a question about what are you excited that MYS is doing right now? Clearly, the Beginning Strings program is a big part of that, and we'll talk later about how people can connect with your organization if they would like to invest in supporting what you do related to this and anything else. But is there anything else NYS is doing right now that you're particularly excited about?

Raúl Gómez-Rojas:

Oh my goodness. There are many things

Christine Goodner:

I'm sure. Yeah.

Raúl Gómez-Rojas:

I will say though, before mentioning a couple of other things, that one of the really cool things about the Beginning Strings Program is how those groups of kids and their families become a community.

A great example of that is our program at being the Star de La Familia, which is a community center in northeast Portland. It's our biggest beginning strings program, actually. And parents come there to bring their kids to their lessons and their classes. And what happens is that while their kids are in class now, these people, parents, they're hanging out, spending time together, getting to know each other, and that bond, that community bond also works in favor of the kids' engagement and growth within the program. And that idea of community, we also see all across the organization with all of our other ensembles, because it's easy to think about. Sure, kids will bring our kids to orchestra and they'll rehearse, they'll practice, they'll benefit. But what happens outside of those rehearsal rooms in the hallways, the waiting areas, is this really cool way for parents and families and people to come together and get to know new friends, et cetera.

So that's also to me, something that's really valuable about MYS in part because this is our 50th anniversary season. It's a big year of celebration for us. Our season finale concert coming up on June 17th at the early Schnitzer Concert Hall will feature, of course our symphony orchestra, and our very special guest will be Esperanza Spalding, the multi Grammy award-winning jazz singer and bassist, who is an MYS Illumina herself. So this will be a really exciting way to finish her 50th anniversary season with

a world class artist. Our jazz program, by the way, will also be featured in this concert. So right now, we just got past spring break, and now we're really kind of looking at the end of the season. These weeks just go by so quickly, right? Yes. So we are working hard for this final performance on June 17th. That's a Tuesday evening at the A Schnitzer Concert Hall. One thing that makes MYS unique is that in addition to our orchestras and bands, we have a jazz program.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah.

Raúl Gómez-Rojas:

Very few youth orchestra organizations in the country have a jazz program as part of their core programming. And that's something we're really proud of. Currently, we have two exceptional jazz educators working with our students, Christopher Brown and Owen Broder. And to me, it's really cool to see, especially when we make various ensembles, collaborate together like an orchestra with a jazz group, how those kids learn from each other and inspire one another and kind of challenge each other artistically too. So our jazz program is also something that I'm very excited about that we have and that we do.

Christine Goodner:

I love that. I wonder, I was just thinking, what an amazing opportunity for the students to get to perform with other ensembles, other genres, and then also, but with a guest artist, you're speaking about what a great opportunity, how inspiring for those students to get those opportunities to perform. That's a real privilege, and I'm sure very motivating for them.

Raúl Gómez-Rojas:

Yeah, and for many of them, these are transformational experiences, certainly inspiring experiences. The majority of our students, after they play with MYS for however many years, many of them since they were in first grade or younger, most of them go on to do other things professionally besides or instead of music. But we do see an increasing percentage of students who actually go into music in one way or another, whether it's music performance or music education or composition. We have a few conductors now who have come out of NYS and these opportunities to collaborate with world class artists like Esperanza are often catalysts for that decision to go into music because it's something they love and it's something they are already excellent at, and something that, while it is a challenging career path, and we talk about that too, it can be very fulfilling.

Christine Goodner:

And

Raúl Gómez-Rojas:

We're excited to see that mix. Also if kids go into music professionally and others who might not do that. But music remains an important part of their lives forever, really as supporters, as audience members, as board members, or later as parents themselves.

Christine Goodner:

Sure. Yeah. No, I love hearing that. And I think for me, I remember being a high schooler, and I didn't always want to practice by violin, but I was like, well, I want to see my friends at Youth orchestra, and I'm not going to go and not know my part, so I guess I'll get my violin on practice. I think it got me got through those ups and downs in the teen years of like, do I still want to put all this time in? Yeah.

Raúl Gómez-Rojas:

Oh my goodness. Yes. Yes. The bonds of friendship. It's the same with me. I mean, when I was growing up in Costa Rica playing in youth orchestra, I mean, those people are still some of my best friends however many years later, 20, 25 years later, you really do create lifelong friendships.

Christine Goodner:

Yes, yes. Yeah. It's such a great experience and I think really important for motivation. Why do you think it's important for students to get involved in a program with other peers?

Raúl Gómez-Rojas:

I imagine to an extent that people listening don't need a whole lot of convincing about the many benefits that music performance brings to kids and to even just listening to music, it activates the brain in a different way and playing music even more. And I mean, I've lived my whole life in music as a music student and later as a professional violin, viola, teacher, conductor, all of that. So I've seen, and I've known the benefits of music in that way, but not that I'm a parent of a girl who has been learning to play the violin for only about six months. It's been so cool to see her learn to work through challenges through her violin practicing. And she does not practicing. She doesn't. And there are days that we practice for five minutes, and that's a win. We call it a win, and we celebrate it. And she gets pretty frustrated sometimes when she can't get something right. She knows what she wants to hear, and it's not happening. She gets pretty frustrated. But I have seen her work through that frustration.

She will stop and take a deep breath. I didn't tell her to do that, but she's learning to work through these challenges, and she's building resilience and confidence. And then when we go to her lesson, I'm not her teacher, by the way. She has a wonderful teacher that is not me, but I do practice with her. And then when she goes to her lesson and she gets it right, I can see it in her eyes this moment of recognition like, oh, I did that. So I feel like now, and to her seventh or eighth month, she started in October. I can't count. But I can see how that cycle of positive reinforcement of her, she's really starting to see how she makes progress, and that makes her feel proud of herself.

And it's been really cool, like I said, for me to experience that as a parent and to see it in her and to see in these short months how much she has grown through that. So that's the big sort of individual part of it. Your practice, you have your lesson, but then to do it with other kids amplifies that tremendously. She's not yet an orchestra. I look forward to her joining NYU's Younger Ensemble or Overture Strings. But she has started going to Pacific Youth Choir here in Portland, POYC, a wonderful organization with which MYS has collaborated many times, and she loves it. And that's where I'm seeing her bonding with the other kids who do that. She's still not doing it with her violin, but she's doing it singing, which is also just a fantastic thing for anybody really, even as grownups to do this communal activity of doing something together that brings joy. So I'm excited for her to be learning that through choir currently. But those two elements combined the individual growth with the social emotional benefits of ensemble participation, every single kid should have access to that.

Christine Goodner:

I agree. I agree. And I think it's a big ask for me, for my students, because it's not part of their school day in other communities across the country. Now you're going to sign up for another activity on the weekend or whenever their ensemble would meet. But it's also, I just see almost a one-to-one correlation of people don't have that social outlet through high school. It's hard to keep going because just practicing to show me what they learned is not enough. They really need that peer piece. And there's something about making music with other people and just that communal sound, that's just something a little magical about that that I think hooks a lot of us in being part of something bigger than ourselves. Like that. That's beautiful.

Raúl Gómez-Rojas:

And it teaches also that teamwork that you're talking about doing that with other people. You're practicing being part of a team, and you are feeling supported by your team, and you're feeling like a valuable member of your team, which also teaches empathy and compassion, which is so important. It has always been, but it really does feel with crazy things happening in the world right now, that it is all the more important for our young people to learn those values of empathy and compassion. And yes, musical ensemble participation is a great way to hone those skills and learn them and practice them. Yeah,

Christine Goodner:

I couldn't agree more. And that's where I think the Beginning Strings program that NYS is doing is just giving the opportunities to so many more students. And I interview a lot of musicians for this podcast who tell me they got started in a school program or a community program and how vital that was, and how they would never have played an instrument if they didn't have that opportunity. And I'm just always reminded and reminded how important that kind of work is, because so many students just won't know what the role of music will be in their life without those opportunities.

Raúl Gómez-Rojas:

Right. And we are at MYS, it's really important for us to support school music programs, And we serve several school districts in the Portland metro area with varying degrees of music education during the school day. We are not trying to be a substitute for that, but rather the opposite. We're teaching our students who do have music programs in their schools to take what they learn at MYS and bring that back to their schools and be leaders and make their programs stronger. And for those students who do not have programs at their schools, we're teaching them to be advocates and to ask for it as students, but later, also as adults, as they join school boards, as they become active members of their communities because they did experience music growing up for them to have the capacity, but also the grounds to ask, why don't we have this in our schools? So our dream at MYS is to be a part of a community where every school has music education as part of their core curriculum.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, absolutely. I couldn't agree more. So important. And I just see the lack of it where I am and wish it was here. So if people are listening today and they just want to figure out how can they connect with MYS and support what you're doing, whatever that might look like, what would you recommend they do?

Raúl Gómez-Rojas:

Sure. The easiest way to learn about our programs and our events is to go to our website, and that is playnys.org. Or if you Google Metropolitan Youth Symphony Portland, it'll get you right there. And we, as all nonprofits do, we rely on the generosity of individuals for a lot of our funding. And we're also grateful to foundations and businesses and organizations that also support what we do. We do have a gala coming up every spring. We do a fundraising gala. It's a really fun event, and tickets are available on our website too. And that's a great way to support MYS come to the gala. It's a fun party with great food and great music. April 18, it's coming up actually pretty quickly and come to our concerts. Many are free or very, very accessible. We also have concerts at five locations in Portland that is, for example, the Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall, the Newmark Theater. So come and support these young musicians and be inspired by them as well. And that's always a great way to support.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, thank you. We'll put some links to some of those ways to connect with you in our show notes.

Raúl Gómez-Rojas:

Thank you.

Christine Goodner:

And I think if you're listening from around the country, around the world, there might be an organization in your community that you want to look for and connect with and see how you can support. So we just keep our community arts programs

Raúl Gómez-Rojas:

Strong

Christine Goodner:

And thriving. Yeah.

Raúl Gómez-Rojas:

I am a big believer that this generation of kids growing up right now, kids going to school right now, they're going to save us all. They're going to be our saviors. And I think that empathy and compassion are crucial in their formation. And the performing arts are the indisputably powerful way to learn those skills. We need that. So yeah, people listening anywhere they are, like you're saying, Christine, reach out to your local youth orchestra, your local symphony, get involved in school boards and demand for the performing arts to be a core component of our children's education.

Christine Goodner:

Absolutely. And like you said, we need that these days more than ever. Yeah. Thank you so much for your time today, RO. I know we could just keep talking about so many things, but I love your message about why our world and our young people need music, and I love what NYS is doing. I really appreciate your time today to share some of that with us.

Raúl Gómez-Rojas:

Thank you so much, Christine.



Christine Goodner:

Before we go today, here are a few of my takeaways from this week's conversation.

First, I think this was such a powerful reminder of the importance of school and community-based music education. I hope we can all find ways to support what is going on in our local community or spearhead efforts to create something so students have the opportunity to experience that for themselves. Themselves.

I loved Raul's comments about the individual growth and the social emotional benefits of ensemble participation. I couldn't agree more. That was my own experience as well. And I think getting our children and our students involved in situations where they can experience that too, as priceless.

Finally, I loved Raul's comments about how more than ever our children and our world needs, the lessons that music teaches us. I loved his hopeful message. May we all invest in that vision for the future in ways that you can go to [play.nys.org](https://play.nys.org).

I'll put that link in our show notes to read more about MYS, their gala coming up, how to donate and how to get involved, whether that is as a volunteer or as a participant for your child or your students. I hope you join me in doing that. I'm giving a talk this Friday, April 11th for private music teachers on running parent teacher conferences in your studio. I would love you to join me. You can [register@suzukitriangle.com](mailto:register@suzukitriangle.com). There's a link there, and I hope for those of you looking for some support to do that in your own program. So you will come join me there. All right, everyone, have a great week. Happy practicing. Take good care.

Transcript created by Rev.com