



Instructor Spotlight: *Ronda Respass*

and her enduring support of the TDP

TDP master teacher and ASO violinist Ronda Respass is helping to change the face of classical music, one student at a time. Ronda, who is also founder and artistic director of Franklin Pond Chamber Music, a year-round chamber music program in Atlanta for talented young musicians, has been involved with the TDP since the very beginning, 25 years ago.

“I honestly don’t remember how I got involved,” recalls Ronda. “But I was already involved in the education program, coaching the second violins of the ASYO and then I was invited to join the taskforce that started the program.”

Ronda joined the Orchestra in 1969, two years after Robert Shaw began his tenure as Music Director, and she was influenced by the culture he created.

“Shaw was very much for equality and acutely aware of the need for diversity,” Ronda recalls. “He hired more women for our Orchestra when I came in than any orchestra in the world. I didn’t realize it at the time, I was just like, ‘Oh goody I got a job.’ But I now realize that he was a catalyst for inclusion of all people in the arts in Atlanta.”

Shaw spearheaded many initiatives that were designed to include African Americans into the ASO. In this context of inclusion and outreach, Ronda became heavily involved in the ASO’s education and community engagement programs, coaching young musicians in the ASYO since its inception.

Later, after Shaw retired and the TDP was founded in the early 1990s, it seemed natural for Ronda to be part of its development. At the time, the Symphony didn’t have much funding for education. “There was education as far as having kids come to the hall for concerts and the ASYO,” Ronda explains. “Everything we have now was really started by volunteers.”

As a member of the TDP steering committee, Ronda worked with Azira G. Hill, Mary Frances Early and other volunteers to ensure the success of the program. When no venue could be found for the TDP’s first concert, she even opened her home. Ronda has served as a teacher for most of the program’s history, helping to create better growth opportunities than most professional musicians have had.

Growing up in New Jersey in the fifties and sixties, Ronda had a fraction of the resources the TDP provides to its fellows. “I had a youth symphony, there was an all-state and youth symphony--that was it,” she recalls. “I didn’t have any chamber music. My parents had to pay for the lessons. I was lucky because my mother was a pianist and

a musician, and she played with me. So, I was one of the lucky ones. We didn't have anything like the TDP available to anyone, so this is extraordinary."

Today, Ronda teaches two TDP Fellows: ninth-grader Roland Mason and senior Taylor Tookes. Additionally, she formed two string quartets made up of TDP Fellows, who will receive training and coaching through the Franklin Pond Chamber Music.

"I think the trajectory we're on in the program is really good right now," Ronda says. "The Fellows have plenty of performance experiences, plenty of learning experiences.

They have to work at it, and if they don't, they know right away they're not doing what they're supposed to."

Ronda has been connected to the program long enough to see the fruits of her labor. "I met two of our alumni in Paris when I went this year," she says. "And one of them is in international studies and has a good job in Paris, but he plays with an amateur orchestra there. He is spreading the word, he kept music in his life. I love to see where they end up and what they do. Sometimes I can be of support from afar."

Nov 30 | First Presbyterian Church of Atlanta

