

## Alan Shen and PSSO: All for the Love of Music.

Judith van Praag

Puget Sound Symphony Orchestra's founder and music director Alan Shen tells me all members of PSSO volunteer their skills. From the spirited conductor himself, from first violinist to percussionist, from guest performer to press agent put in time and effort without pay.

"Only the harpist gets reimbursed for transportation of the instrument, the thing's too big," Shen chuckles. "And most of us aren't interested in making money off our passion, we all play for the love of the music and for the companionship."

After witnessing a rehearsal of the company I can attest to both facts. When I watched the rehearsal of the group of 60 people crammed in the basement of a church in Wallingford, I thought, those folks obviously love what they create together.

"Volunteer" is too bland a description for the members of PSSO—these folks are "amateurs" in the very best sense of the word. After all, an amateur (from the Latin amateur = lover) is a person who does something for the pleasure of it rather than for money.

Back in the days when Mr. Shen Sr. worked at ITT Raynier as an engineer, Alan studied violin and piano, and his older brother Dan violin. In Aberdeen, where the Shen family made their early home, Mrs. Shen's cooking was famous with the church ladies. So famous that she just had to start a restaurant. The "Jade Tree" was open only on Fridays and Saturdays, from 5-8 PM. Alan was the water boy and Dan bussed dishes. But during parties the brothers would often play their violins.

"We'd get great tips," the now 28-year-old conductor laughs.

The brothers joined the Capitol Area Youth Symphony, then the Olympia String Symphony and later the Tacoma Youth Philharmonic. By age 16 Alan became concert master. Sitting up close, he took in the conductor's baton movements by symbiosis. Though he never had a formal education in conducting, Alan states that

organizing the rehearsals and having strong verbal skills to get his musical intentions across is what really counts.

Notwithstanding Mrs. Shen's high hopes for her sons' musical careers, Dan became a computer engineer while Alan holds a degree in computer science. But music would forever have an important place in their lives. So important, that one day in 1999, 23-year-old Alan, craving a community of likely tuned souls, decided to start an orchestra and brought together "a bunch of people who like to make beautiful music."

On December 6 of that year, a newly created orchestra composed of amateurs, some conservancy students and a few professional musicians, performed its premiere concert at the Museum of History and Industry. On the program were Copland's "Hoe-Down", Brahms' "Variations on a Theme by Hadyn", Ravel's "Pavane for a Dead Princess", and Rimsky-Korsakov's "Capriccio Espanol".

Today seven of the founding musicians still play in PSSO, seven of 60 otherwise unconnected people, who meet once a week for an eight week run of rehearsals, crowned by a performance in front of an audience. And this routine occurs three times per year.

Alan Shen says enthusiasm and dedication of each of the musicians helps the company rise to amazing levels.

By 2002 the orchestra had outgrown the auditorium at MOHAI and moved the three-quarterly concerts to Town Hall.

PSSO's free annual informal presentations at Third Place Books developed into full blown but still free Pops Concerts at Seattle Center House.

"The Pops offer a wonderful low threshold opportunity for outreach in the community. Hopefully Seattle Center House will continue hosting the orchestra the coming years," Alan says.

PSSO's Summer Pops Concerts and "Last Night at the Proms" (which takes place at The Royal Albert in London) share one thing in common; people of all walks of life, people who would never dream of watching or going to a concert of classical

music get to enjoy some pretty fabulous musicians.

PSSO is known for playing "An American in Paris," but also surprised audiences with "Adventures on Earth" from the movie "E.T." and music from equally famous "Raiders of the Lost Ark".

The BIG difference between Prom and Pops is that the latter is still FREE!

This year, at the beginning of the company's fifth season PSSO's program description promised: "Works that sit on the modern side of the classical fence."

Opening the concert at Town Hall on Saturday Nov. 20th is Leodigario del Rosario and Co. The tenor will perform songs and arias from Les Préludes by Liszt, followed by spirited "Symphonic Dances" composed by Sergei Rachmaninoff(1873-1943).

Pianist Jeffrey Reid Baker said about Sergei Rachmaninoff, "(He) made use of the advancement in piano construction. He understood there were expressive and technical possibilities of piano playing beyond those established by Chopin and Liszt."

Let's say that Rachmaninoff was a classical modernist even before Gershwin was out of his diapers.

By the way, thanks to private donations, the company has managed to keep its performance prices low, \$5/\$3 pre-order and \$8/\$5 at the door. Call (206) 253-5128 or email [www.pssso.org](http://www.pssso.org). A good reason to bring the whole family to: "Interplay": Tenor & Co. on Saturday, Nov. 20, 2004 at 7:30 PM at Town Hall, at Eighth Avenue and Seneca Street.

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