

Late Starters Orchestra Fills Void for Adult Musicians

by Leah R. Garnett



The New York Late Starters String Orchestra welcomes adult players of all ages and abilities.

Say you've always dreamed of playing in an orchestra – but you're 55 and don't play a musical instrument? Well, this is one dream that can come true. If you were to start violin lessons today, you'd be accepted into the [New York Late Starters String Orchestra](#) in one year – with no audition.

The New York Late Starters String Orchestra is a group of adult players – ages 25- to- 80, who meet every Sunday in Manhattan, near Penn Station, to play Elgar, Mozart, Tchaikovsky, Handel, Vivaldi, and others. Their members come from the five boroughs of New York and New Jersey.

Unlike many orchestras, no auditions are required and beginners are welcome. The only request the orchestra leadership makes is that you've studied your instrument for a minimum of one year.

Music After 50 talked to Elena Rahona and Andrea Lockett, who founded the New York Late Starters String Orchestra (NYLSO) in 2007. Their first rehearsal of the Fall season took place yesterday, September 13. Their answers to my questions are combined here as NYLSO.

LRG: Where did the idea for the NYLSO come from?

NYLSO: The orchestra began in February 2007. We met at a summer orchestra retreat in 2006 in West Yorkshire, England. It is an annual event for the [East London Late-Starters Orchestra](#), which we each discovered via the Internet. The “camp” was special, in that it was tailored to amateur adult participants, an alluring factor that made the prospect of joining seem less intimidating and more exciting. There was a real sense of community and kinship within the group, all of us coming from a similar place of wanting to fit music into our busy lives.

The ELLSO director immediately started planting seeds about trying to get a similar group of people together in the United States. One would think that New York, of all places, would have a thriving adult amateur music scene, but it does not. The city, for all of its musical offerings, had

nothing like it. Many of the so-called amateur groups in town are composed of former conservatory students, who, for one reason or another, decided not to play professionally.

Playing an instrument in a group setting brings such joy and fulfillment; why should it be an activity reserved only for children and young adults, or accomplished players and professionals? We came back determined to change that.

LRG: What are your musical backgrounds?

NYLSO: Elena Rahona has played violin on and off for the past 10 years. Professionally, she works full-time on a research team at an adolescent health center. Andrea Lockett is a professional poet, writer, and editor and is completing her training in botanical illustration. Andrea has studied violin for almost 4 years, with a few interruptions as she raised a toddler (who accompanies her to lessons.)

“After playing for a few months, I began to wonder where the other adult beginners were,” says Andrea. “After searching around online, I found the ELLSO summer workshop. Their ‘all-comers’ philosophy made it clear that I would be comfortable. When I arrived at ELLSO and met Elena, it was a hoot to find that we were the only participants in our 30’s. Most of the group was in their late 50’s to 90’s. Any time I had mentioned my interest in the violin to others, I had always been told that I was too old to take it up. Now I found I was a ‘baby’ of the group!”

LRG: Are you an arm of the ELLSO?

NYLSO: We are not a branch of ELLSO, but we consider it our sister organization and inspiration. We continue to remain closely tied to the group by returning to the summer workshop every year. We share a common ethos, and sometimes seek their advice and counsel, but we are our own entity and have a slightly different structure.

LRG: How often does the NYLSO meet?

NYLSO: Currently we meet once a week, on Sunday afternoons. As we grow, however, we hope to add a other sessions occasionally, perhaps on a weeknight and maybe experimenting with different musical genres.

LRG: Where does the NYLSO meet?

NYLSO: We meet in midtown Manhattan, at a centrally located rehearsal space near Penn Station. Access to public transportation is important, because our musicians come from all five boroughs of New York and from New Jersey. Space is one of our biggest challenges. Operating on a shoestring budget limits our choices, because studio rental in New York is expensive. We are always on the lookout for a larger, more comfortable space to grow into, but we are lucky to have found a convenient and accommodating space that suits our current needs.

LRG: How many musicians are in each session?

NYLSO: We have a core group of about 20 musicians at each session. We are different from many groups in that we do not require auditions, and we allow people to drop in and out as their schedules demand. We operate in 6-week cycles, with new music each cycle, from September to

June. Players can join in at any point during the cycle. In a city like New York, where the workers and retirees tend to have busy schedules, this flexibility has worked well. Our new season began September 13.

LRG: How many members would you consider beginners?

NYLSO: Probably about 20% of our group has been playing for fewer than 5 years. We define beginners as players who have studied their instrument for at least one year. This is more for their benefit, than for ours, because it is human nature to feel self-conscious about playing in a group, whether or not one is an absolute beginner. It is important to have some basic sight-reading skills and to feel comfortable with elementary bowing technique and tuning one's instrument.

LRG: What is the biggest challenge for the beginners?

NYLSO: People in New York are used to being the best of the best at what they do. It is sometimes hard for players to accept that they are beginners, and they can feel angry or ashamed if they make mistakes. We have adopted ELLSO's philosophy, which is "come as you are." We make it clear that we do not expect perfection; it is OK to make mistakes. In terms of experience, we are a multilevel group, ranging from beginner to advanced intermediate, and each of us develops at their own pace. We explain to players that it is OK to drop out for a few bars if something is too technically challenging, and then jump back in when they feel comfortable. Even our more experienced players make lots of mistakes, and we all spend plenty of time laughing at ourselves.

LRG: How are you funded?

NYLSO: We are a completely self-supporting group. In the beginning we each put a lot of our own money into the group to get it going; it was an act of faith. All members pay a fee each cycle, and they can choose to pay a per-session rate or to pay for the whole cycle at a discounted price. Usually we just break even. The fees support the cost of copying music, hiring a professional conductor, studio rental, and printing/website production costs. We are in the process of beginning to apply for fiscal sponsorship and ultimately working toward our own nonprofit status.

LRG: What is the age range of players?

NYLSO: The current group ranges in age from 25 to 80, with most of the group in their mid-40s and up. It is significantly different learning, or returning to, an instrument when one is older. The brain changes, as does the finger dexterity; we learn differently and sometimes more slowly, but we are still capable of making great strides and happy discoveries about our abilities. Adults are also different in that we seek to intellectually understand the reasons behind what we are doing or the directions the conductor provides, rather than following obediently without question. Our mixed-age group is very pleasing to us, because there are so few activities in our society in which adults of different generations come together and form real bonds with each other. Our only firm requirement for membership is that players be at least 18 years of age.

LRG: What instruments do people play?

NYLSO: Our orchestra includes violins, violas, cellos, and double basses. Unusually, cellists make up about 50% of our group; most similar groups are dominated by violins.

LRG: Who conducts the NYLSO?

NYLSO: Our conductor is Magdalena Garbalinska, a young professional violinist from Poland. In addition to performing solo and with groups, she teaches private violin lessons, and has a lot of experience leading juvenile and adult ensembles. She knows how to provide explanation without condescension, and seeks to help the group improve without ever embarrassing anyone or putting them on the spot. Our group is composed of many people who are accomplished in their own fields of professional endeavor, but who may be inexperienced in this one particular aspect of their lives.

LRG: What feedback have you gotten from orchestra members?

NYLSO: The feedback has been heartening beyond expectation. Many people are cautious when they first come. Is this group really for real beginners? Is it OK to be a bit rusty on sight-reading skills? People come to us and find an absolutely welcoming space, a friendly group of other interesting adults, and a rewarding experience they might never have had in their lifetime. We hang out together after rehearsal for happy hour, occasionally attend concerts together, and some of our members get together at each other's homes for informal chamber sessions. Several members play with other (mostly audition) orchestras, and have invited others from our group to join them.

LRG: Do you plan on doing any concerts for the public?

NYLSO: Right now our concerts are really open rehearsals, meaning that we do not expect to play perfectly and the audience also knows not to expect this. Bringing in family and friends is an important part of building our community too. Coming to the performance helps them to develop enthusiasm and support for what we are doing, which is an important part of encouraging our own motivation. Performances for the public are more difficult because they require the often prohibitively expensive rental of a more formal space. This past June, NYLSO played in Ralph Bunche Park as part of **Make Music-NY**. Several of our members also play in other community orchestras, and we are hoping to collaborate with some of them on joint concerts that would be open to the public.