

Seattle Youth Symphony Orchestra's new music director, Juan Felipe Molano, is already making his mark

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You might not expect an orchestra conductor to be up on teen pop culture, let alone for that knowledge to come into play in a job interview.

But apparently Juan Felipe Molano's casual mention of [a YouTube channel popular with teens](#) during an audition rehearsal, and his easy authority that commands attention without fear, immediately won him the loyalty of students in the Seattle Youth Symphony Orchestra (SYSO).

Add to the list that he's cheerful and energetic, with a broad smile that puts his musicians at ease, and it's easy to see why he might work well with an orchestra whose players are ages 7 to 19.

Molano took over as music director for the 78-year-old Seattle Youth Symphony Orchestra last September, succeeding Stephen Rogers Radcliffe, who left SYSO in 2018 and now teaches at Carleton College in Minnesota. In doing so, Molano now leads one of the largest youth-orchestra training programs in the U.S., reaching some 2,000 students each year. It operates five orchestras, a precollege conservatory program, the Marrowstone Music Festival, plus summer training programs, partnerships with public schools and more.

Its alumni have gone on to become professional musicians, including founding members of the renowned Kronos Quartet and about a half-dozen current members of Seattle Symphony.

"We have alumni in every major orchestra in the U.S., and some international ones," said SYSO executive director Kathleen Allen. Also [among the alums](#): Pulitzer Prize-winning [Seattle Times cartoonist David Horsey](#) (who played French horn), cellist and KING-FM radio announcer/producer Dave Beck, and, according to Allen, Benji of K-pop group B.I.G.

Though Molano has only helmed the organization for a few months, families believe he is already putting his stamp on it, further raising the high standards of SYSO's programs and creating new opportunities for young performers. Local audiences will be able to hear for themselves on March 1, when the organization's flagship Youth Symphony Orchestra performs "Dances of the Americas" at Benaroya Hall.



Youth Symphony Orchestra, the highest-level orchestra within Seattle Youth Symphony Orchestra, performs at Benaroya Hall in 2019. (Nat Seymour / Be Good Event Photography)

"We never had this density of new ideas in such a short time, from how students enter the stage at performances to finding new opportunities for students to perform," said Yuliya Cheung, mom to 13-year-old flutist Julin, who's in the Junior Symphony, one of SYSO's training orchestras.

In addition to looking for performance opportunities outside of SYSO, Molano gives younger students chances to play with the more advanced orchestras within SYSO, believing they not only benefit from the example of more skillful players, but that they also return to their own orchestras equipped to help their peers.

"He wants to share the bounty. He is deliberate about allowing people opportunities to grow," said Sanjay Kapoor, dad to 15-year-old Youth Symphony cellist Asim.

'First is the music'

During rehearsals, Molano punctuates his frequent corrections with engaging personal stories and humorous asides. He hums the melody, snaps his fingers like a metronome and packs in numerous repetitions of a musical phrase in a matter of minutes. But just as his criticism feels gentle, his busyness feels unhurried.

"His conducting is easy to follow," said Asim Kapoor. "The stuff he talks about first is the music, and then he goes into the technicality of how to create the sound. And I've loved everything we've played so far this year."



SYSO music director Juan Felipe Molano is well aware of the power music has to change young lives. He became assistant conductor of a youth orchestra when he was 18. (Mike Hipple)

Students entering the SYSO orchestras generally have previous experience with their instruments. Besides practicing at home and participating in their school orchestras, SYSO students attend rehearsals for four to five hours every Saturday during the school year. The word “excellence” pops up in conversation a lot.

“SYSO makes musicians out of instrumentalists,” said Cheung. “And it provides team-building and a sense of belonging that other kids might get from sports.”

Molano, 44, is well aware of the power of music to change young lives. He started conducting when he was a clarinetist in a youth orchestra whose conductor was often called away. Molano’s friend was the person who was supposed to take over when that happened. But his friend was very shy, so Molano stepped up in his place.

“I liked it,” he says with a smile.

He became the assistant conductor of that same orchestra when he was 18. A native of Colombia, Molano later served as the national director of orchestras for Batuta, the nation's music-education program. More recently, he conducted Youth Orchestra Los Angeles, a program of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. He has also led the LA Phil as guest conductor and cover conductor.

Molano doesn't think there is much difference between conducting youth and professional orchestras.

"Both professional and youth orchestras require creativity. My respect for them is the same. As a conductor, you are there to encourage musicians to be better than they think they are. You have to truly believe they can go beyond their expectations — sometimes beyond your own expectations," Molano said.

But he does admit to a couple of concessions for youth: "The language I use with youth is always positive."

And, "with youth, the unexpected is the rule ... I love the unpredictable things the youth always give me! I have to reinvent all the time and solve problems — I like that risk."

Collaborative partnerships

SYSO is already notable for its scholarships and its partnerships with public schools, designed to create more equitable access to instrumental instruction and to encourage students to learn less popular instruments like the oboe and bassoon — both of which improve the quality of school orchestras while building a pipeline to fill gaps in professional orchestras.



Soamory English from Roxhill Elementary School and Wegahta Giday from Highland Park Elementary School receive coaching from Kim Roy at Chief Sealth International High... (Mike Hipple) More

Looking forward, one of Molano's biggest goals for SYSO is to build new collaborative partnerships with other musical and youth-focused organizations. He dreams of a regional network of youth orchestras and summer festivals that share resources and performance opportunities.

That's music to the ears of students like Asim Kapoor.

"I really want to be a cellist when I grow up, so I need to get as many different perspectives on that as possible," he said.

Although roughly one-third of SYSO graduates pursue musical careers, not every student dreams of playing professionally, and that's OK. It's part of the reason SYSO has so many different programs.

"There is not an ideal student," said Molano. "Every student has to find where they fit into the portfolio."

But whatever the student's goals are, Molano believes in the power of performance to help a musician grow.

"Artists learn by doing," said Molano. "As a musician, the thing I learn in concert takes a long time to learn in rehearsal. Getting in front of an audience is the quickest way to learn."

"Dances of the Americas," 3 p.m. Sunday, March 1; Benaroya Hall, 200 University St., Seattle; \$16-\$54; 206-215-4747, [syso.org](https://www.syso.org)

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