

FEATURE ARTICLE
“Things We Learned at the ASO”
Julia Butler

Who said education has to be boring? If you didn't check out the Musical Open House at the Woodruff Arts Center on October 8th, I'd like to share our experience there. This was our first time, so I had reservations about whether it would be worth it – but we ended up having a lot of fun while learning a lot too. I hope to inspire you to put this event on your calendar for the next time. You won't be sorry!

First, there was the Petting Zoo – not the animal kind, the instrument kind! The kids were allowed to touch the orchestra instruments, hold them, and try to play them. They were encouraged by the ASO (Atlanta Symphony Orchestra) and ASYO (Atlanta Symphony Youth Orchestra) musicians themselves who gladly answered all of our questions too. The instruments were divided up into sections: Strings, Woodwinds, Percussion, and Brass, as well as a Piano section. This really helped cement in my mind which instruments belonged to which family. It was fun to watch these same musicians up on stage later during various performances. Meeting and talking with the musicians helped to make the concerts feel more familiar and personal.

We attended a short, interactive lecture by Laura Jackson. She is the Conducting Fellow of the ASO and conducts the ASO's Young People's Concerts. Some of the questions Laura explained included: just WHAT IS the conductor doing up there anyway; what does the conductor's score look like and how is it different from the musician's music sheets; what is the baton for; what do the conductor's hand movements mean; how can the musicians follow the conductor's lead if they're looking at their own music; how can the musicians see their music when it's so far away from them on stage; is there a school for conductors; and what is the best way for a child to prepare themselves to become a conductor.

Laura had us singing and conducting right along with her. She even worked with some of the kids who tried their hand at conducting us singing. Laura is really great with the children. She's funny, and so energetic. Later, when we sat in on some concerts, I found myself becoming absorbed in just watching the conductor – and what they were doing really made more sense to me! We are also truly lucky to have a female conductor at the ASO as, evidently, they are rarer than hen's teeth. I just checked out Laura's website and I found that she has quite an interesting life story too.

There were no less than 38 musical performances throughout the day in Symphony Hall and in four other auditoriums/rooms. The performances were kid-friendly: 20 minutes, 30 minutes, or 45 minutes long. With all the kids in attendance it wasn't as hushed as a normal ASO concert but the music was still wonderful. People could come and go during the performances without problem also. The musicians ranged from the ASO, ASYO, and ASO Chamber Chorus to local schools and groups. There were solos, trios, quartets, and quintets; ensembles, chamber groups, choruses, and choirs. There were violin, cello,

fiddle, piano, brass, harp, and flute concerts. And we even saw some ballet dancers in the mix.

We also took a tour backstage with the ASO's principal librarian and discovered a whole different world back there. From behind the stage, we could see Laura Jackson actually conducting the ASO and we could see the people sitting in the audience. We learned how the stage hands can move the "walls" and change the size of the performance area. (At another concert recently, we discovered that the front of the stage is really an elevator! That's how they make the pianos appear and disappear). Then we saw the library where four librarians prepare all of the music by hand for all of the musicians for all of the performances. We saw one of the late Robert Shaw's (ASO Music Director 1967-1988) concert scores with his original conductor marks on it (yes, I touched it). And we saw where they store all of the music for everything that's played at the ASO. Then we went down a maze of stairs to the lower level that seemed like a maze of hallways with a maze of dressing rooms for the a-maze-ing performers.

There was definitely something for everyone in the family. Some things we never even had the chance to check out such as the Young Children's Activities. This included Instrument Making, Kindermusik, Music Book, a Parade, and a musical in the Alliance Children's Theater. I saw some really talented face painting too. The kids didn't just get a butterfly on their cheeks, their whole face was transformed by great artwork! This event was extremely well attended, yet well organized. In fact, I was surprised to find myself pleasantly energized at the end of a long day. There must be magic in music!

Parking was a breeze in the new parking garage beneath the Woodruff Arts Center (it's good to be close when you have kids). Yes, it cost us a whopping \$10 to park for the day, but remember, other than parking, this whole day was FREE (if you don't count the T-shirt)! But make a note: the garage across the street was only \$8 per day and the garage at 14th Street is only \$6 on evenings and weekends (about one block away). Also, if you are a member of the HIGH Museum, watch for \$2 off coupons for the Woodruff parking garage in the quarterly magazine. We packed our lunch and, when we got hungry, we retrieved our cooler from the car and ate at some tables between the High Museum and the Woodruff Center. The hurricane-induced weather even cooperated and we had a beautiful sunny day.

Seeing all these different aspects of the ASO has made us look forward to our next trip to the symphony, or any musical performance, or even just listening to a classical CD at home or in the car. So if you see the passengers of a white Honda Civic going down I-85 waving their arms all over the place – don't worry – it's just us having fun!

Julia Butler and her husband, David Lawrence, home educate their eight-year-old son, Liam, in Dacula, Georgia. The next Musical Open House is planned for Fall 2007. Until then, why not take your kids to an ASO Young People's Concert or to see the Atlanta Symphony Youth Orchestra? For more info visit www.atlantasymphony.org and www.laurajackson.net.