

Woman Overcomes Obstacles to Create Local Orchestra

By Jonathan Farrell

"The door is always open to my students," exclaimed Tatiana Ganenko, who for the past two years has been the director of the Sunset Youth Chamber Orchestra (SYCO).

Her Sunset District home is her studio. It also serves as the main office from which she directs the events of the youth orchestra.

Setting the table for an afternoon lunch, Ganenko took time from her busy schedule to speak about her work and her life. Ganenko arrived in San Francisco more than 10 years ago.

"Just in time for the quake of '89," she laughed.

"When I arrived from Russia in October, I was busy finding work while learning my way around," she explained. "My son Michael was with me and we were riding the Muni when things started shaking. We did not know much English but we managed and we got home safely."

Her confidence unshaken, Ganenko was not afraid of obstacles, including being in a new country and having a language barrier. Eager to work, she said, "I was not worried. I was very enthusiastic and I felt there wasn't anything I could not do."

Studying with Victor Lieberman, "concert master" of the Leningrad Symphony, Ganenko received her Masters Degree in Music from the Conservatory of St. Petersburg.

With that classical training as her foundation, Ganenko met the musicians of local orchestras, ensembles and symphonies.

"I commuted a lot back and forth till I found what was best for me," she said.



Photo: Sama Menshel

Sunset Youth Orchestra Director Tatiana Ganenko uses her violin bow to direct her students' performance.

Familiar with world travel, commuting to concerts and engagements around the Bay Area was not a problem. Ganenko is still a member of the Sacramento Philharmonic Orchestra and plays regularly each season.

Undaunted after making the rounds to play with many orchestras, Ganenko became enthusiastic about teaching. She was determined to live out her dream.

"I started teaching slowly," she said. "First just one student a week and then two."

Ganenko was able to freelance teach between her engagements.

"I am much happier being independent," she said.

Perhaps it is that independence that has allowed Ganenko to accomplish her most treasured goal, presently in focus.

"I want to arrange music so it's a challenge for students. I want them to advance in music, not just study it."

"This is why I formed the group, (SYCO)" Ganenko said.

Then turning to Marcia Paulsen and Robyn Chan at the table she said, "Actually it was my friend Marcia here who really encouraged me to start it all."

Paulsen has been instrumental in her support since SYCO began in the winter of 1999.

"When I brought my two sons to Tatiana they had gotten bored playing in an orchestra," said Paulsen, who is the sister-in-law of conductor Constantine Orbelian at the Moscow Chamber Orchestra, "Ages 10 to 13 are a difficult time for kids," Paulsen continued. "They are not little anymore. Their interests change."

They become more interested in what their peers are doing."

Chan, who just recently began sending her daughter to Ganenko for lessons, agreed.

"My daughter Tracy is 12 years old. She has been playing piano since age 4 and is also studying violin. And then, all of a sudden, she got bored and wanted to quit," Chan said.

Ganenko explained. "All I do is challenge them. This keeps the group alive. By doing my own arrangements for any level of student, I keep the students interested. They learn more of what it is to be part of the orchestra."

"Some children are taught a method where they learn a piece by ear," Ganenko said. "I want them to learn compositions by reading the music as it was written and then understand what they read."

Pleased that her son Wade was doing better at the violin, Paulsen got an idea.

"Why not have both my sons ask to have their friends join them in an ensemble," she said. That invitation from kid to kid eventually got word around.

"We started with 12. Now we have 30 students ranging in age from 8 to 19," Ganenko explained.

Ganenko's dedication to music seems to have caught the attention of people in larger professional music circles. SF Opera singers Kristin Clayton and Bojan Knezevic have accepted the students' invitation to sing with them at their upcoming performance at the 15th Annual Youth Arts Festival at the Yerba Buena Gardens May 19.

"How that happened was so unusual!" exclaimed Ganenko. "I was trying to reach a local opera

company. I think to have singers to accompany is good for the students. Yet we just could not connect."

For the past four years Ganenko has been teaching at the French-American International School on Oak Street. She is also directing the school's chamber orchestra.

The connection Ganenko hoped for was not far away. Perhaps by providence rather than coincidence, a student at the French-American International School is the daughter of two SF Opera singers.

For more information about SYCO and its upcoming performance and auditions, call (415) 242-9057. Anyone interested in helping Ganenko turn SYCO into a non-profit group should e-mail info@sunsetyouthorchestra.com or visit www.sunsetyouthorchestra.com.