

Celebrating Taia Harlos' Time as MSO Artistic Director & Conductor

In the Spring of 2024, Taia Harlos made the difficult decision to step down as the Musicopia String Orchestra (MSO) program's Artistic Director and Conductor. While we were sad to see her go, we are immensely grateful for her impact on our students and the legacy she left behind. Her vision for MSO has paved the way for our new Artistic Director, Dr. Jessica Morel, to continue to build the program and its dedication to accessibility and inclusivity.

Taia joined Musicopia in the fall of 2020 when the world was grappling with the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the virtual setting making it difficult to connect with students on a personal level, Taia's commitment to her students never wavered. She described playing online as "the antithesis of what an ensemble is," yet she was determined to make the experience the most it could be and spent her free time developing creative ways to keep the young musicians as engaged and motivated as possible. Reflecting on this time, Taia shared, "It was probably one of the hardest things I had to do in my life, and I'm proud of the work we did to keep things moving forward."

As soon as the orchestra could rehearse in person again, the students were thrilled and Taia knew how to engage them further. She has strongly advocated for giving her students a voice in the music they play, believing that their input is crucial in creating a more engaging and meaningful educational experience. Taia shared that a part of her teaching philosophy is that "learning goes both ways" and in choosing each concert's repertoire, she balanced what they liked with what she thought they should learn.

Perhaps Taia's most notable contribution as Artistic Director was her dedication to choosing repertoires that were diverse and inclusive. While other youth orchestras try to include one piece by a non-white and/or non-male artist to "check off the diversity box," under Taia's direction, Musicopia String Orchestra concerts incorporated numerous works by modern composers and artists of diverse backgrounds like Mariana Martines, Florence Price, Duke Ellington, Soon Hee Newbold, and Samuel Coleridge-Taylor at every concert. Inspired by Musicopia's longstanding commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), Ms. Taia conducted research to discover new artists and their music (which included jumping through hoops to get the score of a publicly inaccessible piece by Martines) as she felt it was important for students to learn about artists they can connect with and look up to. "What makes MSO different is that it's part of our commitment to the students and families to expand their understanding of orchestral music, and part of that is finding representation in the composers I [chose]," she said.

Taia knew that MSO's commitment to diversity shouldn't stop at including the pieces

themselves. For this reason, she took the time to discuss the relevance of her choice when she introduced each piece to the players. In 2022, Taia learned that one of the songs Musicopia Young String Players (MYSP) was set to play in the Spring Concert was by a white man who used a Japanese woman's name to profit from calls for diversity in music. "I met with each MYSP sectional to explain the situation, and of course, they were appalled and didn't want to play it. We literally tore it out of our binders, and many of the students ripped their pages into shreds," Taia explained. "I wanted them to understand the decision-making process behind our music and be part of it." And that she did.

Taia's impact on Musicopia will be felt for years to come; her passion, vision, and dedication have left a lasting impression on each and every student who worked with her. We thank Taia for all that she has done to help our students and organization flourish. We wish her all the best in her future endeavors!