



**National Youth  
Orchestra of Ireland**  
*Ceolfhoireann Náisiúnta  
Óige na hÉireann*

## **Strategic Plan 2024-2028**

## INTRODUCTION

The National Youth Orchestra of Ireland (NYOI) is one of Ireland's longest established cultural institutions. Since it convened its first course in 1970, it has involved nearly 5,000 young artists in orchestral performance, and given concerts across Ireland, Europe, the USA and Asia with an unbroken record of every year for nearly fifty years until Covid caused the cancellation of courses in 2020 and 2021. Those months of enforced inactivity provided time for reflection and have resulted in the production of this new plan for renewal and growth.

After thirty-five years of visionary voluntary leadership, the NYOI transitioned to professional administration in 2007. In the same year it contracted the profile of its activities, reducing the number of ensembles from four<sup>1</sup> to one, favouring younger players in the process, with membership of the new National Youth Orchestra of Ireland restricted to players between 12 – 18 years of age.

In the meantime, often at the initiative of the NYOI or its leaders, opportunities for orchestral performance by children and young Irish people have proliferated in centres across Ireland and beyond. A dedicated Irish Association of Youth Orchestras administers other ensembles and promotes a wide range of supporting and ancillary activities, and other orchestras including the Irish Chamber Orchestra and the Irish Baroque Orchestra have become more active in providing education and training, and supporting young and emerging artists.

Notwithstanding these welcome developments, access to education in instrumental performance is still highly uneven in its distribution in Ireland and with few exceptions is not free, in contrast to so many other developed countries where it is a given component of the education curriculum. As a result, participation by children and young people who are able to meet the entry standard for participation in a youth symphony orchestra is restricted – socio-economically and geographically – to those whose parents have been willing and able to support their tuition.

The National Youth Orchestra cannot solve these inequalities for young Irish people but it can provide inspiring evidence of the power of music to transform young lives, cooperate with others to provide pathways to participation in its work, and add its voice to that of the Arts Council and others who advocate for music education to be a universal right in Ireland.

Membership of the National Youth Orchestra of Ireland remains the highest ambition of young orchestral players but the cut-off point of 18 years has become a barrier – to participation by a generation of older players, and to the opportunities for the widest orchestral repertoire and the highest standards of artistic achievement. Over the next five years, we plan to address this by strengthening our capacity for artistic leadership, extending the age range, and at the same time tackling barriers to participation, encouraging the widest possible engagement by young players in this formative personal and artistic experience, wherever their path in life may take them. At the same time, we will invest in our own capacity for excellence in arts planning and management.

We have produced this plan and we will implement it in a way that involves the young players themselves to a much greater degree than heretofore, as well as their parents and teachers and other stakeholders in music education and performance in Ireland. We prepared it in consultation with them, with the NYOI's funders and others that share our vision for Ireland to be a place where music and musicians thrive.

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<sup>1</sup> The Junior Irish Youth Orchestra, The Senior Irish Youth Orchestra, Camerata Ensemble and Strings Training Programme.

## WHAT WE DO

The National Youth Orchestra of Ireland is a symphony orchestra<sup>2</sup> for young musicians living anywhere on the island of Ireland. Currently the age range is 12-18 years. To participate in the orchestra, every player is required to audition or re-audition each year. The admission standard requires the performance of stock orchestral excerpts, and auditions are conducted each October by an independent music professional in 5 centres around Ireland, including two in Northern Ireland.

Once the young players meet the performing standard, the orchestra works with them and their family to meet any special needs they may have of a social, learning or any other kind – part of the routine process of induction. Besides qualifying players to participate, the adjudicator assigns a score which is used by the tutors in assigning a specific position in the orchestra.

Auditions are advertised on the NYOI website, and audition prep advice is provided. A small fee contributes to the cost of the process. Successful applicants represent about 50% of those auditioned, and typically each year about 35% new players join the orchestra, as 18-year-olds or others step out. Separately each November, the NYOI also runs auditions for Irish candidates - mostly older players - on behalf of the European Union Youth Orchestra for which it is the national partner.

Once admitted, the player is entitled to play in the two following residential courses – a seven-day one in winter (including one day for a concert performance) and a ten-day one in summer (including three performances). About every three years the summer course and performances are held overseas – most recently in Abu Dhabi, Lisbon and Amsterdam.

Many young players already play in a smaller local orchestra or ensemble at their school or college or in their local area – the NYOI provides the only opportunity in the Republic of Ireland for young people to rehearse and perform the full range of symphonic repertoire under professional guidance. According to its members, the NYOI provides playing opportunities of the highest artistic standards available in Ireland<sup>3</sup>.

The NYOI has its own bank of instruments and equipment including auxiliary instruments that young players don't routinely own (such as bass clarinet, contrabassoon, Cor Anglais, timpani and other percussion instruments) – in many cases giving them their first experience of playing these. For players on a professional path this auxiliary instrumental experience is essential to their employability, their remuneration and hence their career prospects as orchestral artists.

Resource sharing (including instruments and equipment) between the NYOI and other orchestras – professional and youth ensembles – is continuous and routine to its way of working, as is partnership on shared projects in promoting the NYOI's educational remit.

The residential courses are held in school holidays, using the premises of secondary boarding schools. Aside from the artistic challenges, forging a successful ensemble from 105 young individuals represents a formidable logistic challenge for which a professional team of 13 welfare staff, and 14 professional tutors including an orchestra manager are retained. To maximise the

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<sup>2</sup> The scope of modern orchestral repertoire requires up to 110 players, roughly in these numbers: violin (34), viola (12), cello (10), double bass (8), harp (2) flute (4), oboe (4), clarinet (4), bassoon (4) French horn (6), trumpet (5), trombone (5), tuba (1), percussion (5), timpani (1), keyboard (1).

<sup>3</sup> Member feedback in 2022 and 2023 informed the preparation of this plan.

opportunities for participation, in 2017 the NYOI initiated anti-clash planning with other ensembles including those managed by the Association of Irish Youth Orchestras, since some of the players also play with other ensembles in the same periods.

The annual fee (unchanged for more than fifteen years @ €750 per member) contributes to but does not cover all of the residential costs of up to 105 players, including transport to and from the courses and to the end-of course concerts, as well as meals on the course and on the road. Fees are waived in about 10% of cases, at the discretion of the General Manager. A contribution to players' subsistence, as well as the full artistic and educational costs of running the courses are covered by State grants augmented by modest box office income.

The artistic and educational staff are drawn from the NYOI's roster of senior orchestral players and teachers, all Garda vetted since players under 18 years are considered vulnerable persons under child protection legislation. Guest conductors from Ireland and overseas are engaged based on their artistic reputation and on their track record with young players. On each course, the members of the orchestra have a players' committee to ensure that any issues of concern – personal or artistic - are dealt with in a timely and appropriate way.

Artistic decisions – currently made by a sub-committee of the Board in dialogue with the guest conductor – reflect the orchestra's strengths: in Summer 2023 for example the programme included a requirement for piano, celeste and tubular bells. The music for each section is circulated in advance, and tutors meet their players over a Zoom call to help them prepare for sectional rehearsals – a welcome post-pandemic innovation and a way of identifying any potential sources of anxiety or concern to individual members. Following a half week with section tutors and a rehearsal conductor in the course residential venue, the full orchestra comes together for rehearsals with the visiting conductor on day 5.

At the end of the Summer course, the orchestra tours the programme to venues around Ireland: the Winter course involves only one performance. A professional recording is made of each programme for archive and promotional purposes, and for live streaming on YouTube. In cooperation with the Irish Wheelchair Association, concert audiences include people with physical disabilities. Buses from major urban centres transport the players to the rehearsal venue, and to and from concerts; after the final concert of the tour, the members of the orchestra are collected by their parents or guardians.

## WHAT OUR STAKEHOLDERS EXPECT

Everyone who cares about music in Ireland has a stake in the success of the National Youth Orchestra of Ireland, above all the **members** of the orchestra themselves.

*What's so magical about being a member of the NYOI is that we are all very different people - we have different values, different interests, we come from different backgrounds and we're all in different stages of our musical journey. The joy and excitement of playing together fills the room in a way that is so strong it's almost tangible; what starts as playing with a hundred strangers suddenly becomes playing as one, as if we have been lifelong friends.*

*Being in the orchestra has taught me so much about my own playing; how to adapt, how to follow, how to lead. Most importantly, it has shown me new ways to love music, given me a place where I feel at home, and offered me moments of sheer joy, moments that I will never forget and will appreciate for the rest of my life.*

Daimée Ng | Member, NYOI 2023

**Alumnae** of the orchestra with a professional stake in the Irish musical landscape stress the importance of high standards.

*NYOI has historically set a standard in bringing together the best young musicians across the island and creating excellent performing opportunities for them. The training, guidance and inspiration that the courses provide undoubtedly bring them closer to a professional standard.*

*NYOI is the national leader in granting these opportunities and providing educational value for young musicians that are on a professional path, and as such it must be cherished. It is crucial that increased funding be provided to sustain this trajectory, and it is in the interest of professional performing ensembles like the RTÉ Concert Orchestra that we continue to collaborate with and support the NYOI in any way we can.*

Joe Csibi | General Manager, RTÉ Concert Orchestra

Music **artists** expect that we will provide young musicians with opportunities to grow their skills and abilities but also their engagement with great music.

*For me, the experience of playing in the NYOI was transformational. It redefined my understanding of music, showed me what was possible from collective effort at a very high level, and allowed me to see beyond myself to broader horizons.*

*Today as I look around the orchestra pit at Irish National Opera, I can trace back the skill, enthusiasm, dedication and achievements of the majority of our orchestra and can see directly how the NYOI influenced and propelled so many of us at a crucial stage in our lives.*

Fergus Shiel | Artistic Director, Irish National Opera

Participating in the NYOI is an end in itself, whatever the future career path of its members, and many of the NYOI's members continue to play music for the rest of their lives, in a professional or an amateur capacity. Others go on to a career in the arts or creative industries, and professional **managers** tell us that the NYOI is an indispensable element of the professional formation of

orchestral performers. The managers of Ireland's three principal professional orchestras<sup>4</sup> are among those who got their first experience of management experience on NYOI courses, and nearly every Irish-born player in Irish professional orchestras is a graduate of the NYOI.

*Challenging young musicians with masterworks must continue. As I near the end of a long career in music in Ireland, I have worked with generations of members of the NYOI. The NYO provided for them, also, a unique pathway into the professional business by providing them with the opportunity to perform major orchestral works such as Stravinsky's Rite of Spring and Richard Strauss's Ein Heldenleben under some wonderful conductors. Apart from just musical concerns, the youth orchestra provides a unique opportunity to develop life-long friendships and alliances. In a small music world, these links are invaluable.*

Gerry Keenan | CEO, Irish Chamber Orchestra

**Teachers** and leaders of music education institutions place a high value on the experience provided by the NYOI.

*The NYOI is a flagship national ensemble that gives Ireland's young musicians the opportunity to represent our nation at the highest level. This ensemble is vital to the ecosystem of Irish musical life, and I hope that it will continue to be an inspiration into the future.*

Deborah Kelleher | Director, Royal Irish Academy of Music

**Internationally**, the quality of the experience provided by the NYOI must stack up with what is available to emerging professionals in other countries across Europe.

*Youth orchestras are at the centre of a musical and social ecosystem; not just offering the privilege of performing some of the great orchestral masterworks of our times, but also offering a framework for forging friendships and experiences which can transform young lives in the most positive way. All over the world, youth orchestra systems can have transformational societal benefits, maybe most notably in Venezuela, but also across Europe, Asia and the Americas.*

*Support for NYOI should not only inspire a greater number of young musicians of the next generation, but also serve as an investment in leaders and influencers of the future in Ireland, both in the arts and more broadly.*

Donagh Collins | Chief Executive, Askonas Holt & Opus 3 Artists. Interim Chair, NYO Great Britain

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<sup>4</sup> The National Symphony Orchestra, the RTE Concert orchestra and the Irish Chamber Orchestra

## OUR PURPOSES AND VALUES

Our **vision** is for an Ireland where music and musicians thrive.

Our **mission** is to provide exceptional educational and performance opportunities for young musicians from across the island of Ireland in the full symphonic repertoire to support their development to the greatest extent of their talents.

We value

**EXCELLENCE** in realising the creativity and artistry of our members

**AMBITION** for the fullest musical realisation of our members' potential, driving everyone who participates in our work

Active **PARTICIPATION** in our work, making it a far-reaching social and cultural, as well as an artistic, experience for everyone involved

Our **CONNECTION** with players, parents, teachers, peer organisations and professional ensembles ensures our place in the continuum of music performance in Ireland

**RESPONSIBILITY** in our approach to the care and nurture of young people at a formative time in their lives

## HOW WE WILL DELIVER OUR MISSION

### 1 Maximise opportunities for young musical artists to participate in our work

We are committed to making participation in the NYOI a realisable aspiration for any young person with the aptitude and ambition to be involved - whatever their circumstances. We would like to extend participation to older players, and broaden and enrich the experience for all of our members.

We recognise that so long as tuition in musical performance forms no part of the primary or secondary curriculum, and most young players receive their education in music from fee-paying institutions (public or private) the population of young people who can avail of the opportunities we provide will be limited.

We will join our voice with that of others who advocate for the centrality of music in education, we will partner with others to stimulate the widest participation in our work and we will demonstrate the fruits of engagement in orchestral performance in the cultural, social and artistic lives of young people.

In order to maximise opportunities for children and young musical artists to make great music, we will

1. Collaborate with peer organisations (youth ensembles, education institutions, professional orchestras and others) to create a new year-round foundation programme for younger players (aged 11 – 14), stimulating interest and providing experience in orchestral playing, enhancing supports for young people to play less-familiar instruments, and creating pathways into orchestral playing for young people who – for whatever reasons - might not otherwise have had the opportunity to consider it.
2. Improve the audition process by strengthening the professional team involved; energetically promote participation in the foundation programme - and later the NYOI - by actively soliciting interest among young players, their parents and teachers who might not have considered applying, and support them through their entire journey with the NYOI.
3. Devise and secure funding for an enhanced bursary scheme to augment our existing subsidy, so as to promote greater participation by players of all ages where the cost of attending courses could otherwise be a constraint, including older players in full-time education.
4. Partner with others, including local schools and promoters, to stimulate interest in orchestral playing, for example by programming our concerts in young person-friendly ways, and to add our voice to that of others who lobby for musical performance to be better provided for as a matter of core educational provision.

We will measure our success by the intake of older players to the NYOI and their re-engagement year on year; by positive consultative inputs from orchestral teachers, parents, music institutions, educators more generally and our peers in the music sector about our player recruitment processes and our new foundation programme; by feedback from the NYOI Members Council indicating they support the way the orchestra is changing, including a heightened interest in learning auxiliary or lesser-played instruments.



## 2 Provide opportunities for young musicians to engage with great art and artists

The NYOI is not the only orchestral ensemble for young Irish musicians, but uniquely it provides its members with professionally-supported rehearsal and performance opportunities in Ireland and abroad in the full range of symphonic repertoire to the highest standards.

Our members include some young players who are already set on the path that will lead to the life of a performing artist, some who identify that path as a result of their experience with us, and others for whom music performance will always be part of their lives as they pursue other careers in the arts or more widely. Whatever their path, their time with the NYOI is precious and we do everything we can to nurture their growth as musicians.

Recognising that we have a unique position in providing vocational training responsibilities to pre-professional musicians at the apex of Irish youth ensemble experience, we will ensure that the essential disciplines of orchestral performance are embedded in our programmes.

To provide opportunities for young musicians to engage with great orchestral art and artists, we will

1. Create a new part-time role for an artistic director to be responsible for every aspect of the NYOI's artistic mission (other than serving as an orchestral conductor), starting with the recruitment of its members and the cultivation of a year-round relationship between them and the orchestra's work and how it could better be designed to provide them with the best possible experience.
2. In 2025, extend membership of the NYOI to young musical artists until the age of 23 or (in the case of those in higher education) until their post-graduate studies have been completed, and thereafter over the next three years, cut off the entry age for new members to 15.
3. Through longer-range forward planning with conductors, soloists and coaches, and more intensive artistic and educational partnerships with peer institutions, set a more ambitious programme for repertoire and performance, and improve artistic standards.
4. Partner with others to make membership of the National Youth Orchestra of Ireland a more enriching year-round artistic, educational and cultural experience including opportunities for emerging young conductors and composers, workshops and open rehearsals with visiting artists, and access to orchestral concerts and opera performances.

We will measure our success by the feedback we get from players, teachers and professional peer institutions about both our foundation and symphonic performance programmes; by the provision of opportunities for our players for a range of artistic, vocational and cultural experiences; and by evidence from the orchestra that they value the quality of experience we provide.

### 3 Bring great orchestral performances to audiences in Ireland and abroad

As an orchestra of young people, we have a unique voice which we want to bring to the widest possible audience, including audiences of children and young people and audiences overseas. We plan to work more closely with other ensembles and with other young artists including young conductors and composers, to broaden the repertoire and the range of musical experiences we offer.

Our residential course model is the basis for preparing repertoire but with more advance preparation by conductors, course tutors and members we will make our time together more productive, enriching the experience for our players and audiences alike.

To bring great orchestral performances to audiences in Ireland and abroad, we will

1. Plan further in advance, facilitating a wider range of repertoire, musical genres and performance collaborations with young and adult conductors, composers and soloists as well as other youth ensembles, professional orchestras, choruses, dance and opera companies.
2. Improve the quality of our performances by longer preparation and better design of our courses, taking account of the impacts of a change in the age profile of our members.
3. Enhance the wider performance skills dimension of our courses in cooperation with conductors, orchestral coaches and others, cooperate with professional ensembles and promoters to provide year-round opportunities for our members including workshops or open rehearsals by visiting artists and conductors.
4. Improve the performing experience for our members and grow audiences for our work by playing the best venues in Ireland and overseas and marketing our tours more effectively and more widely, involving our players more in the process.
5. Broaden the scope of our audiences to target children and young people, building excitement and interest in the repertoire we perform, and encouraging young people to get involved in playing orchestral music.

We will measure our success by the quality of our performances as measured by an objective external musical auditor; by feedback about our performances from audiences, educators and other stakeholders; and by our capacity to broaden the reach of our performances to new audiences old and young, in Ireland and abroad.

## 4 Renew our own capacity to be a great youth orchestra

As the National Youth orchestra of Ireland enters its second half century, we have consulted and reflected on our place in Irish musical and cultural life and prepared this plan to guide our work for the next five years. Having operated for nearly twenty years with a single manager augmented by a professional artistic and welfare team to run the bi-annual residential courses and concert tours, we recognise the need for our organisation to grow and to change in the face of the opportunities and challenges before us. We are deeply mindful of our responsibilities for the welfare of the young people we work with, especially as we introduce an older cohort of players.

To implement this plan, we will invest in our management, leadership and governance capabilities, involving our current and former members in a more active way and promoting wider public recognition of the power of music to transform young lives. We will make an annual business plan to deliver on the headlines set out in this strategy, and report each year on progress in implementing it. We will be more active in gathering evidence of the impacts of our work on our members and more widely; we will deploy this evidence to promote our mission and to support others who share our vision and values.

We have been assured of the goodwill of a wide range of our stakeholders and we will look for practical evidence of this in building new structures, consolidating partnerships and providing additional resources.

To renew our own capacity to be a great youth ensemble, we will

1. Consolidate our core staff and expand it to provide for artistic leadership, more connection with our members, greater engagement with peer institutions, improved marketing and fund-raising.
2. Engage more actively and continuously with our current, former and prospective future members, supporting the creation of a year-round players' council, augmenting our governance structures to involve them more centrally in our planning and decision-making, and moving our operations to a base more connected with more of them and their teachers.
3. Establish a consultative forum with instrumental teachers, educators and professional ensembles to improve our collective capacity to ensure these changes will be for the benefit of our players and ultimately of musical life in Ireland.
4. Solicit additional funding from public, private and earned sources to ensure that cost isn't a factor limiting participation, and to implement our ambitious plans.
5. In cooperation with our members and alumni, gather and use anonymised data about their profile to contribute to the evidence base informing our own work and that of policy-makers and others.

We will measure our success by the transformative impact of new staff recruitment, as well as the satisfaction and retention of existing key staff; the successful establishment of a members' representative council and its integration into our ways of working; improved engagement with all current and former orchestra members as evidenced by their participation in the work of the orchestra, social media interaction and survey evidence; and effective governance as measured by external evaluation.

