





HOLIDAY SPIRIT

Santa was especially generous to Yankees fans this past December, but bringing joy to Tampa-area children has long been a Steinbrenner family tradition

By Jon Schwartz



One day earlier, the Yankees had called together the assembled media at the 2017 Winter Meetings in Orlando, Florida, to introduce the newest member of the team, Giancarlo Stanton. The reigning National League Most Valuable Player slipped into his new pinstriped jersey with ease; he should find similar comfort in the 2018 lineup, where he will be surrounded by sluggers such as Aaron Judge, Gary Sanchez, Greg Bird, Didi Gregorius and others.

Five days before that, in the press conference room on the service level of Yankee Stadium in New York, the team had welcomed new manager Aaron Boone. It was a big day in the Bronx, a celebrated return for the hero of the 2003 American League Championship Series. The new manager will have plenty of arrows in his quiver as he learns how to write out lineups and run a big-league team this spring.

The week ended on Dec. 12 with more goodwill, as former Yankees star Tino Martinez stood on a stage before a crowd of some 2,000 guests. The roar was familiar.

The cheers are *often* loud when it comes to the Yankees, and this was a particularly big week. But the ovation Martinez received was unique. It was a group of third graders from Pinellas County, Florida, children that school administrators had identified as high-potential yet at-risk. And even though he was wearing a No. 24 Yankees jersey over his white dress shirt, Martinez wasn't talking about his World Series grand slam or the ceremony when his plaque was unveiled in Monument Park. He was reading "A Visit From St. Nicholas" — better known as "The Night Before Christmas" — while backed by the Florida Orchestra, the climax of the first of three Children's Holiday Concerts that the Steinbrenner family and the New York Yankees Foundation were presenting.

In New York, the Steinbrenner name evokes images of parades through the Canyon of Heroes on the heels of cold October nights with magical celebrations. But in Florida, where the family is based, it's altogether different. Sure, the baseball part is there. But there's also the emergency facility at St. Joseph's Children's Hospital bearing George Steinbrenner's name. There's the Boys & Girls Clubs that the family has nurtured for so long, the schools and Little

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Leagues they support. And, for the past 29 years, there have been holiday concerts for local at-risk youth.

“When my father established this, it was always about quietly giving back behind the scenes and making the world a better place,” says Jennifer Steinbrenner Swindal, one of the Boss’ two daughters. “I think he tried to pass that on to all of us, as well as to the Yankees, and I think that this is one of those great things that the Yankees do in Tampa to make the world a better place for these kids.”

This year’s three concerts took place on Dec. 12, 13 and 14 in Clearwater, Tampa and St. Petersburg, respectively. And other than the specific students in crowd, it would be difficult to find anything measurably different about the shows than those of the past three decades. That’s by design.

“I’ve been involved since the beginning,” says Robert Romanski, who conducted the Florida Orchestra for the three concerts. “Mr. Steinbrenner and [local Tampa news anchor] John Wilson got together, and John said, ‘There’s only one guy I want to conduct and that’s Robert Romanski.’ So Mr. Steinbrenner, myself and John sat down, and a lot of the pieces we play today, I’m the one

who suggested them and Mr. Steinbrenner fell in love with them. This is the 29th year we’ve done the exact same program two or three times a year.”

The run of show comprises a series of popular Christmas songs played by world-class musicians, with Wilson serving as the emcee and his wife, Mary K. Wilson, adding vocals on several of the numbers. The performance reaches its peak when a famous Yankees player or coach comes out and reads the poem as the orchestra plays underneath his words. There’s even some ballet thrown in, a few movements from Tchaikovsky’s “Nutcracker Suite” performed by skilled dancers. But for crowds of children who have never been exposed to productions on this scale, the performances also hit an interactive and educational note.

“This is your show,” John Wilson promises early in the program. “Believe me, a lot is going to happen.”

Over the course of the next hour, Wilson accompanies the orchestra, teaching the audience about the different families of instruments — strings, woodwinds, brass and percussion. At various times, he isolates individual families so that the kids can hear the differences. At one point, the orchestra demonstrates how much variety you can introduce by making small changes in tempo

and instrumentation, playing versions of “Jingle Bells” in rock, pop and country-western styles. There are “oohs” and “aahs” during the ballet sequences, particularly for the extremely physical and acrobatic Russian Dance. “Every year, until Santa comes out, the person that steals the show is the Russian,” Romanski says.

“It’s not only fun, it’s learning for them, learning about the orchestra,” says Melanie Faulkner, Hillsborough County’s supervisor of elementary music education. “Because of the schools they come from, they don’t have this experience with their families — they can’t afford it.”

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The show is a hit, and you can understand why so little has changed over the years. Whether engaging with Wilson as he introduces each instrument, singing along with popular favorites such as “Jingle Bells” and “Feliz Navidad,” or listening to a personal speech about hard work and smart choices from a pinstriped star before he reads the poem, the students get so much more than an hour of music. The goal is for it to be a life-changing experience.

“These children may not have ever seen a performing arts center, let alone an orchestra and ballerinas,” says Steinbrenner Swindal. “More than anything, I just wish everybody the merriest of Christmases and to know that, with the Yankees, this is what we do.”

It’s also very much in line with all that the Steinbrenner family hopes that the New York Yankees Foundation can accomplish in the community. The concerts represent a small piece of the work that the foundation puts in over the course of every year, along with regular donation drives, volunteer efforts and generous donations.

“How do you grow as a person?” asks Brian Smith, the Yankees’ senior vice president of corporate and community relations. “You get access to something outside of your day-to-day. And then you take a liking to it or an interest in it, and then you want more. That’s how you grow.”

But access can be tricky without a guiding hand. For a lot of kids in difficult circumstances, it’s hard enough to make sure that they’re going to school and doing the work that they are assigned. Concerts cost money. Athletic equipment isn’t cheap. And the fact is that bad influences are often more commonplace than good ones.

So the impact that the Steinbrenners have on the community isn’t lost on the players and coaches who participate in the concerts and the other outreach opportunities that come with being part of the Yankees family.

“I was born and raised in Tampa,” Martinez says. “Even when I was in high school you saw what Mr. Steinbrenner was doing in the community here, the schools he was taking care of, the Boys & Girls Clubs. He was doing so much — he always did — but when you’d run across him, even at high school, you were in awe of him not just because he owns the New York Yankees but his name’s on every building in Tampa. It’s all part of the Steinbrenner family, which made the Yankees that much greater.”



JOHN AND MARY K. WILSON



“WHEN MY FATHER ESTABLISHED THIS, IT WAS ALWAYS ABOUT QUIETLY GIVING BACK BEHIND THE SCENES AND MAKING THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE”

—JENNIFER STEINBRENNER SWINDAL

“Hal and Jenny and Jessica and Hank continued the whole thing. They don’t have to be at these events, they could hold them and let somebody go to them and let them enjoy it, but they show up and they care.”

During the concert, John Wilson echoes Martinez’s sentiment, recalling a time when Mr. Steinbrenner — always willing to open his checkbook to help those in need around Florida — felt the urge to contribute more than just funds. Horrified by the images he was seeing of the devastation from Hurricane Andrew in 1992, “He called me and said, ‘John, I’m going to take the keys to a truck myself and drive to Miami,’” Wilson recounts. Once there, the then-62-year-old Boss asked to be put to work. “The Steinbrenner family has done more for kids than any family I know,” Wilson says.

And nearly a decade after the Steinbrenner patriarch’s passing, the charitable legacy remains nearly as resonant as any of the Yankees’ on-field achievements.

“When you see individuals in the organization — players, front office staff — when they get involved, it’s usually like, ‘Wow, we were able to touch the lives of others that day,’” Smith says. “It’s a priority, it’s fueled by that commitment and, as a result, we’re making a difference in the community.”

For all of the concerts’ educational elements, the visit from the Yankees representative — even more than the visit from Santa himself — is what makes the afternoon truly unique. This year, in addition to Martinez, the other two concerts featured pitching prospect Andrew Schwaab, pitching coach Larry Rothschild and big-league reliever Adam Warren.

“I think for the players to do it and for myself as a coach, it almost re-energizes you to see the kids,” Rothschild says. “Any time you can do stuff like this, see kids smile that don’t always have that opportunity, it’s just great.”

“But I looked at it and said, ‘That’s a pretty long poem!’ I’ve done a lot of public speaking and stuff, so I think when you look out and see the kids, it’s just going to make it a lot easier.”

Romanski arranges the music such that he can keep in time with the reader no matter what pace he moves through the poem. Keeping an eye on the musicians and an eye on the reader, there are repeats and timing tricks he can employ so that it all feels like a flowing arrangement, even as he accounts for any unexpected hiccups. It’s actually one of the easier parts of the production for the veteran composer, who keeps conducting the holiday concerts because of the great joy that he gets from the children’s reactions.

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"I'm often asked, 'What's your favorite piece of music?'" he says. "And my answer hasn't changed since I became a conductor — it's the one I'm conducting. What I don't forget is that I maybe am doing this for the thousandth time, but this audience is seeing it for the first time."

The line evokes memories of Joe DiMaggio, who said he gave every game his all because there might be some kid watching him for the very first time. In the case of the Steinbrenner family's holiday concerts, that's almost definitely true. The kids leave school to hear some Christmas music, but in the process, they learn so much more than they ever could have expected. Romanski recognizes the importance of music



ROTHSCHILD

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education — "Without the arts," he says, "we are barely sentient beings" — but he knows that such events are a luxury for the children who get to see the concerts each year.

More than anything, he hopes that they bring something home from the event, a memory that can shape the rest of their lives. "I think I could make a better argument for getting rid of algebra and keeping in band, music, orchestra, dance and all of those things because in my life, the only time I've ever used algebra was when I was trying to figure out how many miles to the gallon I got, and now my car tells me that every time I fill up, anyway.

"But every day, I want to *feel*. I do 1,000 concerts a year, and these are my three favorite and the three most important things that I could ever do." ❧



SCHWAAB