

**PATERSON PRESS**

# These Paterson students use bows and strings to tune out annoyances

*2-minute read*

**Joe Malinconico** Paterson Press

Jan. 20, 2026, 4:20 a.m. ET

PATERSON — Standing in a semicircle around their conductor, six cellists and 12 violinists slowly plucked their way through the seven chords of a D major musical practice scale.

They were all novices in grades 4 through 8, and had gone through only a few weeks of instruction.

The children's faces showed their inexperience and uncertainty, as their eyes moved back and forth from the strings on their own instruments to their teaching artist, José Pietri-Coimbre. And yet, those same faces also showed determination and joy.

“It’s hard,” said Sara, a sixth grader. “But if you keep practicing, you’re going to get the hang of it.”

***Story continues below photo gallery.***

Sara and her cohorts are part of the latest expansion taking place in the Paterson Music Project, an orchestral program launched in 2013 that has grown from 30 participants to more than 350 at multiple schools in the city.

Musicians from the program have performed at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark and the Ravinia Festival near Chicago, and with the Los Angeles Philharmonic Youth Orchestra.

“It’s about more than just teaching them to play an instrument,” said Shanna Lin, the project’s director. “We’re also trying to help them with life skills like grit and confidence.”

## **'Controlled chaos'**

Lin works for Union County-based Wharton Arts, New Jersey’s largest nonprofit musical education program, which works in partnership with the Paterson school district and some charters. She said the program embraces newcomers to orchestral music.

“It’s like controlled chaos at the start,” Lin said of teaching novices. “But it’s always new and exciting.”

Leo, an 11-year-old at Awadallah School, said he was quick to sign up when he heard about the new program. He remembered his mother showing him videos of a man playing the violin. “The sound made me feel happy,” he said.

Leo said he sometimes practices at home, where his mother listens to him play. The youngster said his appreciation of the violin has grown.

“There’s something about the high pitch and the delicate beauty of it,” Leo said. “It’s like music to my soul and my mind. It’s so soothing. It’s like I heard it before.”

## **Tuning out the annoyances of outside world**

Ruth, a 14-year-old eighth grader, said playing the violin helps her tune out the annoyances of the outside world. She said she practices at home as much as possible.

“It give me my own space,” she said. “It takes me into my artist world.”

On a recent weekday evening at Awadallah School, Pietri-Coimbre went through the basic beginner steps, like the right way to balance violins against necks, how to hold bows in rest position, and how much rosin to apply to bows.

“If we put too much rosin on, it's just as bad as not putting enough,” he told his pupils.

## **Saving up for a piano**

The children are a long way from being able to tune their instruments, so Pietri-Coimbre did that for them. Several times, he urged the students to yawn deeply.

“There’s a nice chemistry that happens in the body when we yawn,” he said. “It releases chemicals in the stomach, and we relax.”

Sara, 12, said she had wanted to learn how to play the violin since she was 6 years old. So far, she said, the lessons from the Paterson Music Project have been fun. The student said she is also “obsessed” with the piano and guitar. In fact, she’s been saving her money so someday she can buy her own piano.

Sara said she has \$30 stashed away for that piano.

“It’s a start,” she said.









