


 NEW WAYS



Strings Strings

The Status of School String Programs: THE NEED TO BROADCAST THE CURRICULUM

Louis Bergonzi

A string program's survival and growth depends on a number of related factors: a first-rate ensemble program, a competent teacher, successful efforts at recruiting and retaining students, involved parents, supportive administrators, a working relationship with the local music industry, and effective administrative processes for making decisions and solving problems. Yet recent experience has shown that these characteristics are not a guaranteed vaccine against efforts to weaken or eliminate programs. Many string programs have survived the most recent battle of shrinking budgets or ill-conceived school reform efforts. The war is not over. Now is the time to consider what we can learn from "the survivors," and what we can do to ensure that our students continue to receive string instruction as part of their public education during times of fiscal restraint. To assist us in expanding long-term support for string instruction in schools, let's first examine the broadest context in which decisions regarding program funding are made.

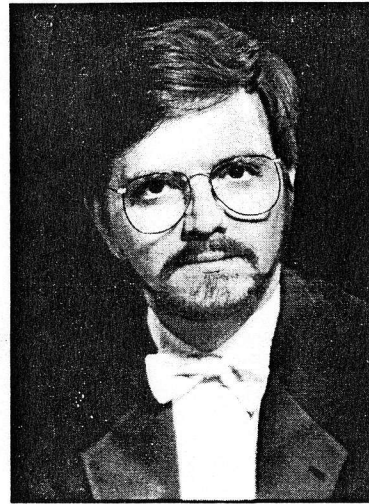
What Do Taxpayers Support?

Underlying any successful

string program is vision, which may be a congruence between the goals and accomplishments of the string program and the expectations of the larger educational community - administration, parents and taxpayers. This vision is based on shared values in place before a program begins and that develop with the program. They can be influenced by presenting a polished performance, creating a positive image for the school district, developing students' self-esteem, winning competitions, or providing entertainment for the community. These values vary, at best, by school district; at worst, by individual teacher. Budget-driven threats to a string program can be overcome by appealing to these values, summoning the support of parents, administrators or school board members in reactive defense of a program. Recently, however, the economic circumstances that drive school funding decisions often have rendered these types of program justifications ineffective.

There are other fundamental values, not site-specific, securely related to education and awarded high regard by parents, teachers, and administrators: *children and learning*. Investments of time, equipment, personnel, and money are made to the degree that an instructional program is perceived as involving *all students* in the educational community in the processes of thinking and learning.

We recognize that string students are engaged regularly in musical learning and thinking by creative and dedicated string teachers. But consider for a moment non music parents, other teachers or school administrators who may view our efforts as the preparation of high-brow entertainment accomplished by training



does not involve the intellect, something that is "nice" but not essential, to have in one's life.

What cultivates these perceptions about string programs? Do we provide evidence to parents, teachers, and administrators of the instructional process behind our concert performances? Do we provide information that will expand their musical understanding based on a deeper respect of what teachers and students do on a daily basis?

Contributing to Basic School Values

Our position in schools would be more secure if we were perceived as a

"the good kids" to engage in a group activity that they, as likely non-musicians, consider "magical." This means that a string program may be vulnerable to attack if it is perceived to be elitist or driven solely by the pursuit of performance at the expense of musical learning.

The Need to Demystify the Public Perception of String Teaching

Depending on their own musical experience, parents and administrators view the process and products of learning a musical instrument, including ensemble performance, as mystical, educational, entertaining, or artistic. People who have not had a formal musical education, or even worse, a negative experience, easily view what we do as some sort of "magical," non-intellectual activity done primarily to prepare entertainment, something that only certain individuals can do, something that

non-selective aspect of the educational program, resulting in an artistic product with a core of unique skills and knowledge taught in a sequential instructional process. The educational community's view of string programs must demonstrate that string education is a unique kind of learning process in which all students are welcome in recognition of every student's potential to learn. We need to balance their perceptions of the *product* with those of the *process* by removing the "magic" of string teaching and learning for the non-musician and non-teacher.

Broadcasting the Curriculum As Well As the Concert

Parents become familiar with the process of learning to play a string instrument when they hear their child practicing at home. Administrators, colleagues and parents typically view the finished product of our efforts in the form


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of a concert performance — if they attend. While they may recognize and respect the related hard work and effort, the process of preparing for the concert is hidden and remains a mystery. We need to broadcast the essential, *curriculum-driven* process which leads to student learning.

Informing the Public

Parental Preview. Hold a parent meeting near the beginning of the school year. Demonstrate the types of instructional activities used in teaching their children. Preview the whole first-year curriculum. Give a sample lesson. Have children teach parents what they have learned up to that point. This can be repeated throughout the year and is valuable as student skills develop.

Teachers' Teach-In. Use a professional in-service opportunity to teach your students' classroom teachers and administrators a beginning lesson. Preview the skills and materials taught during the year and demonstrate the related teaching techniques. Show how string playing is accessible to everyone while you improve your relationship with classroom teachers.

The String Show. Most television cable systems have to provide a local-access station to the community. Use this free access to your community's cable television system to produce and broadcast review string class lessons for your students. Have them practice along with you via the television and with their parents. Remember, *Wayne's World* has nothing on you!!

Informance. Perform one less musical selection and use the time to lead an open rehearsal of a piece planned for a subsequent concert. On a concert, include three or four pieces in different stages of concert preparation, i.e., sight-reading, rough rehearsal, detailed rehearsal, concert-ready. Show your audience how their orchestra gets ready for the concert performance they all enjoy. "In-form" as well as "per-form."

Exhibit nonperformance work. Include any written work the students do for class such as biographies of composers, program notes, or concert reviews as part of a concert event. Have students prepare program notes and introduce the concert repertoire to the audience, including discussion and solo performances of major musical themes.

Reporting student achievement. The way in which we communicate students' musical achievement to members of the educational community is important to developing their perception of the string program. Do they see a letter grade (A, B, C, or S), narrative comments, a portfolio compiled by the student and teacher, or a check-off or rating of curriculum-referenced skills? Curricular goals and objectives are brought to the attention of parents through the format and content of the progress report, whether we like this or not. We must use this to our advantage.

At the secondary level, where computerized grade reports are more likely the norm, a string teacher can publish and distribute a personal series of competency statements related to the string curriculum which parents and students can use to reinterpret the standardized teacher comments.

Progress Notes. In addition to program notes, convey the skills and knowledge that were developed as a part of preparing the concert repertoire in the printed concert program and in any publicity. Let people know that more was taught in the ensemble classroom than "the piece."

But What About the Real World?

"Gee, this sounds okay, but it's pretty unrealistic given my thirteen buildings, four orchestras, 400 students, double basses that need new strings, and the mountain of phone messages in the back seat of my car." Be selective: adopt one of these ideas per year; present a single "informance" for a single piece, for a particular school or concert, for one of your orchestras, or for only part of the year. Decide what works for you.

String teachers have recognized that being visible on a regular basis within a school building assists their efforts at recruiting string students. We must increase the visibility of the instruction and learning that culminates in musical concert performances. We need to focus attention on the instructional process so that the education community recognizes how well we address two values they hold so dear — children and learning. In this way we will contribute to the long-term strength and support for string programs in our nation's schools.

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UNITED WE STAND.

DIVIDED WE FALL.

The following was received by Carol Barach, a graduate student in music education at the Eastman School of Music, University of Rochester, Rochester, New York.

The music education profession often competes within itself, breaking into separate entities - band, orchestra, chorus, and general music. The resulting fragmentation alters a society's perception of music, and weakens the credibility of music as a fundamental component of education. String programs often fall victim to the competition which exists within our profession today.

Is music education as comprehensive in character and practice as any other subject in the field of education? In English, poetry is taught at a different time than creative writing. These are seen as two different topics within a larger framework. Therefore, they are viewed as necessary to a comprehensive education in English. The same concept should exist in music. Orchestra, band, chorus, and general music should be treated as equal elements of a balanced music program. If a string program is cut, a portion of the curriculum that is as essential to music as poetry is to the English program disappears.

When a music faculty does not act as one, they perpetuate the myth that music is not a fundamental constituent of a child's education. When any one faction does not concern itself with the welfare of the others, outsiders assume that certain parts of the music program are superfluous and expendable. If others do not sense an underlying congruity within the subject taught, they will not respect the fact that it should be included in the curriculum.

It is for this reason that the various disciplines in our profession must unite. The belief that "nothing can harm my program" is dangerous, not only to the individual, but to the profession as a whole. Many educators have been lulled into a false sense of security. Large enrollments, concert attendance and a triumphant marching band will not be enough to convince a skeptical school board of music's intrinsic educational value. No music program, no matter how successful, will remain in the curriculum if it cannot stand the test of time and become a part of the larger educational picture.

As a profession we need to be aware of the importance of our commitment to the teaching of music. For this reason, cooperation is necessary at all levels. With a cohesive core of courses, music education can ensure the success of all students. Teachers in every facet of music must support each other. If we are to survive as a profession, the competitive nature which exists today between the different parts of our profession must establish a nurturing environment if we are to exist tomorrow.