

The American String Teachers Association

String/Orchestra Instruction in Schools in America

White Paper
September 2006

Very often I get asked the question, "What does music mean to you?" However, to me there is no one word to describe it; there is no one symbol that music represents. It has no limits expressively and its effects are stirring.

The question to be asked should be, "What is music to you?" My enthusiastic response would be, "MUSIC IS LIFE!" Whether reaching into the deepest and darkest caves of the heart or depicting a most beautiful and radiantly alive morning in the spring, music is experienced differently by everyone. It breaks language barriers and opens up a whole new way of communication, much deeper than anything that can be spoken.

My life simply would not be complete without music. Every day it seems that it grows more and more a part of me. After this past summer I figured out many of my views regarding music and how I would let it affect me. I know that it's definitely not an avocation, but my life's vocation. Through music I hope to reach not hundreds but thousands of others, hundreds of thousands, as I believe God gave me this gift to share, to change lives. Not only that, but music has opened up so many doors for me. It has allowed me to meet my closest friends, professors from all over the U.S., famous conductors, venerated musicians, and even one of the most important people in my life, my girlfriend. In some way or another, music has given me all that I have and made me all that I am today.

Isaac Stern once said, "Unless you feel that you must live with music...that without music we are not alive, [then] don't be a musician." Music has been and forever will be that indispensable driving force in my life.

*Martin Guerra
Senior, '07*

Current Status and History

In the early 1900s, string instrument lessons were offered as a component of the regular public school curricula. The students were instructed by the same teacher that taught them all other general education subjects. The time devoted to learning to play an instrument was mere minutes. Today, string teachers are certified musicians and professionals instructing entire classes of students who are devoted to learning how to play the violin, viola, cello, and bass. The same is true for the symphony orchestra setting where string, wind, and percussion instruments are also part of the class.

Instruction

- 16 to 18 percent of school districts offer string/orchestra instruction
- 27 percent of elementary schools offer string instruction
- Beginning string instruction most often occurs in the 4th and 5th grades
- The majority of string programs exist in larger suburban school systems—only 30 percent are in urban schools
- 7,300 teachers provide string instruction in elementary schools
- 12,500 string teachers offer instruction at middle, junior high, and senior high school level students
- Approximately 50 percent of high school string/orchestra students are school leaders in classes and activities and are members of academic honor groups
- The majority of string/orchestra students enroll in college
- Music students have significantly higher SAT scores than the average student population; string students have the highest among music students
- Most high school string/orchestra teachers report that their string students are in the upper 10 percent of their graduating class
- More than two-thirds of students who begin playing string instruments in elementary school continue to participate through high school
- 28 percent of string students are African-American, Hispanic, or Asian
- First and second year string students' math and reading test scores are higher than the general student population in suburban, urban, and rural schools
- After two years of study, students who participate in the arts and music programs generally have higher GPAs than students not participating in the program
- Students who participate in orchestra and band programs in the schools are less likely to abuse substances, including alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs
- Students in school orchestras learn teamwork by playing in a group, have self-discipline due to practicing their instruments out side of school, and gain enhanced aural and motor skills coordination when in a safe school environment

Teacher Shortage

- There is a severe shortage of qualified school string teachers: more than **5,000** position openings are currently available
- One out of every five string teachers plans to retire in the next five years
- 57 percent of string teachers predicted string teaching openings in their schools between 2002-2004
- More than one-quarter of string teaching openings were not filled in 1999-2001 because teachers could not be found to staff them

Trends

- The number of students enrolled in string/orchestra classes steadily increased between 1980 and 2000
- Two-thirds of schools offering string instruction reported an increased string student enrollment between 1995 and 2000 (most recent data available)
- Between 1994 and 1999 there was a 28 percent decrease in the number of low

- socioeconomic level school districts that offered string instruction
- The most recent curricular change in string/orchestra programs is the dramatic rise of Mariachi music and instruction. In addition, fiddling and jazz have been introduced into the school orchestra curriculum
- Colleges and universities have significantly increased their extent of string teacher training during the last 25 years

Elements of Successful String/Orchestra Programs

The following is based on a relevant study conducted in the 1990s of string programs that identified elements of successful string programs. Those elements include:

- Frequent string instruction: at least twice per week at the elementary level, and daily at the middle and high school levels,
- Teacher demonstrates the playing skills students should learn,
- Teacher understands the pedagogy for teaching students' playing skills.
- Teacher relates to students successfully—good classroom management skills, the ability to challenge and reward students, relates well to parents and administrators, and is an advocate for the program in the community,
- Adequate funding of the program,
- Teacher is an excellent musician,
- Teacher is able to communicate and advocate the value of the program,
- Written curriculum showing the goals and objectives of the program, and sequenced instruction per grade level, assessment, and values, and
- Strong parent, community, and school administrative support.

Factors that Influence School String Programs

- Degree of school administration support including principals, arts administrators, superintendent, and the school board,
- Level of funding for staffing, print music, and instruments,
- Support from parents of students enrolled in the program,
- Community support among voters,
- Support from musicians in the local community,
- Leadership of string teachers in the program,
- Support from classroom teachers, and
- Communication skills of the teacher.

Benefits for Supporting a String/Orchestra Program

A music education program is only comprehensive if it includes a string/orchestra program because:

- More students can experience the arts first-hand if they have access to string instruction,

- The world's greatest composers—Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart for example—have composed a greater number of original music for strings than for any other medium. String students can have a hands-on experience with the works composed by those considered the best in history,
 - Participation in school string programs affords students the opportunity of life-long learning by directly becoming involved in the arts. According to the American Symphony League, there are more than 1,800 adult orchestras to join in the United States.
- Students learn the value of hard work, time management, teamwork, and artistic expression because of the practice time needed to master their instruments.
- Successful string programs bring recognition to students and their schools,
- String programs in the schools strengthen bands by offering opportunities for wind students to perform with strings on full orchestra symphonic music,
- String programs strengthen choral programs by joining the choir in performing the great chorus and orchestra masterworks such as Handel's *Messiah*, and
- String programs enhance school drama and theatre programs through the performance of Broadway musicals.

Future Needs

- More string programs in the schools
- More qualified string teachers
- Increased funding to create new string programs, especially in urban and rural areas
- Better school and community understanding of the importance and unique value of school string programs

Summary

- Since 1980, the number of students playing string instruments in the schools has increased, even though less than 20 percent of school systems in America the United States offer string instruction
- During the last 10 years, more than one-quarter of school systems with a large percentage of low economic students have eliminated string programs despite students in the arts outperforming their non-musical peers in every subject at every grade level
- String students, at all school levels, academically outperform their peer students
- String students develop musical, social, and intellectual skills that they may use throughout their life
- Results of national Harris Polls consistently reveal strong support for arts education in the schools. In a 2005 poll, 93 percent of respondents agreed that the arts are vital to providing a well-rounded education for children and 86 percent agree that an arts education encourages and assists students in the improvement of their attitudes towards school. By including strings in arts programs, more students would receive arts education

Desi Alston owes his life to the violin. Growing up in north Philadelphia, Desi and his classmates were exposed to gang violence, police brutality, drugs, and daily carnage. But thanks to the violin—and a little rejection—Desi avoided these pitfalls and gained a life.

In fourth grade, when I was eight years old, I accidentally found the violin, or rather it found me. One day when I was sitting in class a visitor to our classroom asked, “Who wants to play the violin?” and I immediately raised my hand. I didn’t know what the violin was but a chance to play in school was a chance to play! I, along with two other students, was taken down to the teachers’ cafeteria where a young woman—a student teacher—was waiting. She gave us two tests- one written and one aural. I failed miserably and the teacher asked me to return to my classroom. But instead of leaving, I broke down crying—I felt it was unfair to give up on ME that easily. I vowed I would learn to play the violin and the teacher let me stay. That initial rejection was the catalyst for my dedication and resolve and I began an arduous journey to realize my dream.

Beaten before concerts, harassed by police, and his face smashed into concrete, Desi never let his daily tribulations deter him from practicing or playing the violin. He was so wrapped up in the music his mother often had to tear him away from the violin just to eat. Desi was determined to do something with his life and he knew that was his ticket was the violin.

After graduating from Temple University at the age of 21, Desi was offered a position with the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, D.C. and hasn’t left since; he just finished his 32nd year with the National Symphony Orchestra.