Professional Musicians

in the

Schools

Part I

by

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It is usually inspiring for student instrumentalists to hear fine performers, and so concerts by professional musicians can enrich school music programs. But when performers present a formal concert at a school and then depart immediately as is usually the case, much of the educational value of the exposure is missed, even if the school music teacher does conscientious preparation and follow-up. Feeling the need to make school concerts a more immediate learning experience for student string players, two Board of Education in the Toronto area recently organized special workshops designed to involve the performers directly in a teaching situation.

For their experiments, the Boards selected performers with particular interest and experience in teaching. North York chose the fifteen-member Chamber Players of Toronto, most of whom teach music in metro Toronto schools, at the Royal Conservatory, or at the University of Toronto Faculty of Music. Scarborough chose the Orford String Quartet, who coach chamber music groups at the Kelso Music Centre and at the University of Toronto where they are Quartet in Residence.

Because of the specialized nature of the workshops, the Boards selected a relatively small number of talented and interested string students and teachers from the area, and brought them to the school where the session was to be held. In North York, high school students and teachers participated. In Scarborough, there were students from grades 7 to 13, plus several graduates now in university
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who have retained their connection with the Scarborough music program as members of the Scarborough Symphony Orchestra. Secondary school and elementary school itinerant instrumental teachers also attended.

The workshops began by presenting the performers in their traditional role. This gave the students and teachers the opportunity to hear and see fine string playing and to sense the special kind of communication which exists in chamber ensembles playing without conductor. This sort of exposure to performers is tremendously important, but it perpetuates the dichotomy between active performers and passive listeners.

So the next step was to involve the performers and students in active, cooperative music making.

At the two North York workshops, the Chamber Players finished their performance and then moved from the front of the auditorium back to where selected students were sitting, two to a stand, with their instruments. The professionals sat in with the students so that there were three players to each stand, a professional between two students. Victor Martin, musical director of the Chamber Players, then rehearsed the combined group in movements from three works, chosen to demonstrate a variety of musical forms and styles. The rehearsals began with movements from a concerto grosso,1 featuring student soloists. This

1. Handel's Concerto Grosso in G+, Op. 6 No. 1 was chosen for March 1, and John Stanley's Concerto Grosso in D, No. 1, for April 12.
The Chamber Players of Toronto gave advanced students solo experience, and gave all the players the opportunity to work on the particular intricacies and problems of solo-accompaniment, concerto-ripieno playing. Following this, Victor Martin conducted and rehearsed the group in a violin concerto, then led the group as soloist in the final run-through. Again the group worked on the subtleties of accompaniment and realized first-hand the need to be sensitive to the soloist and to each other when performing without conductor. Finally, the group worked on a movement from a piece for full string orchestra which Prof. Martin conducted in rehearsal before leaving the student concert master to lead the final performance while he participated as a player in the ensemble.

When placed in this close working relationship with professional performers, the students received immediate suggestions and help with specific problems and were able to relate to the professionals on an individual basis as fellow-musicians. Inspired by the playing of their professional colleagues, many of the students discovered new potential in themselves, and played beyond their apparent capabilities. The educational gains of such an experience, while difficult to measure are obvious.

At the Scarborough workshop, the Orford Quartet began their teaching session by demonstrating and talking informally to the students about basic factors in ensemble playing — such things as alertness and physical readiness in that moment before playing begins, aural and visual sensitivity to each other, and the constant capacity to adjust to each other in tempo and intona-

2. On March 1, Prof. Martin played the first movement from J. S. Bach's Violin Concerto in E+ with the Chamber Players and then with the full group of students and professionals. On April 12 he played the first movement of J. S. Bach's Concerto for Two Violins in D- with an advanced student violinist, accompanied by the joint student-professional orchestra.

3. Holst's St. Paul's Suite on March 1, Mozart's Eine Kleine Nachtmusik on April 12. The latter work the Chamber Players performed themselves, then with the students.
tion. Then selected students dispersed to four rooms to form string quartets. Each quartet, coached by a member of the Orford, rehearsed the same technically easy but musically interesting quartet, which involved a number of problems of ensemble playing. Following this, the entire group reassembled to hear the Orford discuss and perform the quartet. Then all four student groups plus the Orford gave a joint performance of the piece. After the performance, there was an informal question period. The students who had been quite inhibited early in the session were now eager to ask questions, both musical and personal. The Orford members came across not only as communicative musicians, but also as real human beings with beards and families. To bring the workshop full circle, the Orford concluded as they had begun by performing for their audience.

Because these workshops were designed to give the students an experience of chamber ensemble playing, the number of participants had to be kept low. (There were 28 student performers at each North York workshop and 16 in Scarborough). However, some other string students were invited to attend as observers. Although those who played probably learned more through active participation, the observers no doubt gained a good deal from watching the rehearsals and from listening to and questioning the performers.

For the teachers, the workshops served as valuable in-service training, providing the opportunity to observe the rehearsal and performing techniques of the guests.

Obviously, the concept of a session where the performers work directly with students need not be limited to strings. The idea is equally applicable to wind playing and singing, as groups like the Canadian Brass and the Festival Singers of Canada have demonstrated. But the group involved must have a genuine commitment to teaching. Unimaginative workshops lacking pedagogical awareness and excitement will obviously do more harm than good.

Money for special educational ventures of this sort, while in predictably short supply, is not completely unavailable. The North York string workshops were supported in part by the Musicians’ Union Performance Trust Fund, while Scarborough received generous assistance from the Toronto Symphony Women’s Committee. School Boards in smaller centres might co-operate with local concert organizers in sponsoring tours of performers who would do school workshops in addition to formal evening concerts. The Ontario Arts Council has expressed interest in encouraging tours, and the combining of the performing and teaching roles might attract financial support more readily because of the diversity of the service to the community.

The Orford String Quartet

In terms of value per dollar, workshops of the type described above are excellent investments in music education. The participating students and teachers return to their schools ready to pass on to others their enthusiasm and newly acquired skills. The dividends are thus ploughed back into the system, and the benefits can be far-reaching.

4. “My Heart is Yours” by Orlando di Lasso from Four Elizabethan Madrigals, arranged and edited by Katherine K. Davis and Hazel Weems, published by Schirmer.