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Pulling Strings to Get Violins Back Into Children's Lives

COLUMBIA, S.C. — THE defensive posture of classical music these days has been much argued. But in the face of folding orchestras, diminishing finances, vanishing record sales and retracting audiences, there exist stubborn and imaginative pockets of resistance determined, for example, to put string instruments into the hands and ears of children. The University of South Carolina, now a model for the rest of the country, is doing work here that may at best keep the violin a mainstream instrument and at worst provide it a permanent niche. It will not be allowed to become an antique.

Music history, like most histories, chases its own tail. Only a few centuries ago, the violin and its portlier siblings the viola and the cello were challenges to public civility: strident and vulgar, contaminants threatening the calm and decorum of their close cousins, the family of viols.

The viola da braccia and the viola da gamba were the instruments of ladies and gentlemen. Their subdued

resonance and their inclination to blend with others suggested principles of discretion and social order. Musically inclined students at 16th-century Oxford "esteemed the violin to be an instrument belonging only to a common fidler and could not endure that it should come among them," as one Anthony Wood wrote in his autobiography at the time.

Now, with the violin's cultural primacy being challenged by newer instruments like amplified guitars and keyboards, the former threatener has become the threatened. And residents of this Southern city of 500,000, where symphony subscriptions are cherished and the blare of hip-hop and rock inspires public complaint, are rallying to its defense.

The university's String Project is a result of 20-odd years of proselytizing by Robert Jesselson, a professor of cello. His endless hours of grant applications, in-house cheerleading and civic cajoling have created a program that not only teaches 8-to-12-year-olds an art virtually excluded from the pop-music culture around them; it teaches the people who teach them.



Courtesy of the String Project, University of South Carolina

Gail Barnes of the String Project with her young orchestra.

The second project is as vital as the first: undergraduate performers steering their lives toward teaching. Mr. Jesselson reports that an astounding 5,000 full-time string-teaching jobs in American public schools regularly go unfilled. When school districts have no one to hire, those that have string programs are likely to discontinue them. Many who do teach strings are actually trained on other instruments.

"When I came here, in 1981, one high school in this

district had a string program," said Mr. Jesselson, a man of nervous enthusiasm who studied and has performed in both America and Europe. "Now all five do."

The percentage of the nation's schools offering string and orchestra projects, he adds, has fallen from 67 in 1962 to 19 in 1975 and 16 in 1994. Virginia and Maryland offer growing programs. Mr. Jesselson is particularly proud of the nearby Spartanburg, S.C., public schools, where 800 students, 13 percent of grades 5 through 12, play string instruments and are in orchestras.

The String Project is not part of the public schools but is in deep symbiosis with them. Mr. Jesselson's undergraduates at the university teach one on one and wander among the ranks of young players at the project's orchestra rehearsals, ferreting out bad intonation and adjusting grip and posture. With time, these young teachers-to-be take on some of the rehearsals themselves, stepping in for the String Project's director, Gail Barnes, and its master teacher, Johanna Pollock.

Children arrive by way of newspaper articles, word of mouth and show-and-tell forays into the public schools. Parents pay about \$50 a semester and rent instruments. At a recent "informancy," or progress-report concert, about 100 children at one point handed their instruments to their parents, who were then guided in pizzicato performances of simple songs. As the children get older, the public school absorbs them into their

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own programs.

The String Project can be as much social as musical. In Columbia, the students are strikingly varied in race (last year, of a total of 356, more than a third were black) and economic background (a quarter were below the poverty line and a quarter from families with female heads of household). "Sometimes we feel like a kind of Peace Corps," said one student teacher. Mr. Jesselson remembers a child who asked for a new teacher because her present one resembled a man who had physically abused her. Mastering technical problems of bowing and fingering seems to promote a self-esteem not easily achieved in other areas of their lives.

Several teaching undergraduates began as pupils in the String Project, yet Ms. Barnes and Mr. Jesselson will

be happy if all they produce is a future audience at ease and in sympathy with classical music. As much as excellence is valued in this program, attentiveness and enthusiasm are valued even more. Those who try are not turned away.

The South Carolina program is a significant success in what has become the 26-member National String Project Consortium, self-described as a "loose association." Host colleges match modest grants (\$10,000) from the consortium. Student teachers are paid for their efforts. In Columbia, they get \$1,600 a year: a small amount but still an enticement. Participating schools develop their own programs, which have now spread to every part of the country including New York, where the Brooklyn College Conservatory of Music has a string project.

The prevailing culture of music departments and conservatories has always placed aspiring performers

on a higher level than those studying music education. Yet a half dozen undergraduates questioned here all seemed eager for teaching jobs. Still, most expect to keep playing in one group or another, as music teachers sometimes do. A few have already auditioned for Columbia's recently formed community orchestra, which will complement the South Carolina Philharmonic and the well-regarded University of South Carolina Symphony Orchestra.

In Renaissance and Baroque education, music was thought to be as essential to creating civilized young people as mathematics. Mr. Jesselson agrees: "I have a fantasy-theory that if we could find a small town geographically isolated, not near a big city, a place with a stable population and traditionally held back by poverty and a lack of education, and if we could provide a first-class music education for maybe 20 years — movement and singing for 2- and 3-year-olds building toward instru-

mental and vocal training — comparing them with a matched group with less musical background would teach us a lot about the effects of music on children's lives."

The isolation might serve a purpose. A major flaw in classical music's delivery system may indeed be its status as feeder apparatus, with small communities, like minor league baseball teams, weeding out less-than-perfect performers and sending the survivors closer to the top: in rare cases to major orchestras in New York, Boston, Cleveland, Chicago and the like.

Mr. Jesselson's student teachers, from Columbia and cities like it, seem happy to stay where they are. Perhaps classical music should stay there with them. At any rate, a Haydn string quartet movement played at the informancy by four black undergraduates made it clear that classical style and technical competence are not the exclusive property of big cities and international arts centers, nor of any single culture.

"Loose associations" of small communities, each serving its own musical needs, might just be a source of health for an art whose big-time operatives are not doing all that well these days. □