



*Strings students at Twin Branch Elementary School were among those to benefit from the Euclid Quartet's two-year residency in the Mishawaka schools.*

# Growing Strings

## Fischhoff and the Euclid Quartet in Mishawaka's Schools

*by Paige Risser*

Soon, we'll all start to feel the warming influence of spring, but right now the snowy February weather outside of Mishawaka High School makes sunshine and short sleeves seem a long way away. A number of the students in this 8 a.m. orchestra rehearsal look as though they'd rather be back in bed, still huddled under the covers. A cello player suppresses a yawn. Three string bass players stand in back; on the risers below are ten cellists and more than 20 violists and violinists.

Meanwhile, Jameson Cooper, violinist with the Euclid Quartet, quartet-in-residence at Indiana University South Bend, sips steaming coffee. The quartet's cellist, Si-Yan Darren Li, sits beside him on the risers, a stylish knit scarf wrapped around his neck. Violinist Jacob Murphy and violist Luis Vargas are there, too, watching as the members of the orchestra fidget, waiting for the signal to begin.

Orchestra director James Keranen raises his baton, counts out a rhythm, and the bass and the cellos launch into a moody, mysterious piece in a minor key. Bows make contact with strings, toes tap, and before long the energy from the music—"Ghosts of the Taman Negara" by Victor Lopez, about hunting for tigers in the jungles of Malaysia—breathes life into the room.

These Mishawaka string students are about to be treated to a master class with professional musicians, thanks to a collaboration among the Fischhoff National Chamber Music Competition, the Euclid Quartet, and School City of

Mishawaka. Now in its second year, this special residency program has two parts: the "Stories and Music" program, known as S.A.M.-I-Am, for primary students, which links a picture book with a live musical performance, and the master classes, which involve middle-school and high-school strings students. S.A.M.-I-Am runs in the fall and the master classes take place during the spring.

Keranen stops the student musicians after a few minutes, and wryly suggests that the quartet members might have some ideas for improvement.

Murphy gets to work.

"Violins: I think many of you are hiding in the section," he says, as he strides down the risers to the front of the room. "[This way] it'll never sound bad, but it'll never sound good. Take a risk. It's an energetic piece. Don't be afraid of the frog!"

The frog, as string musicians know, is the part of the bow near where the bow is held. Many students find it awkward to play with that part of the bow, but it produces a particularly strong and vigorous sound.

Cooper walks to the front of the room, his violin and bow in hand, to add his advice. He isolates a few notes from "Ghosts" and shows students a specific bowing technique to improve their sound.

"Use a tiny bow: up, down, up, down," he says, demonstrating the slight wrist movement for the violinists. "It's like bouncing a basketball; you do it more from the wrist, not the whole arm." He waves his arm from the floor to

the ceiling and back, illustrating his words.

After the violists and violinists practice their measures, the cellists and bass players take their turn. Li reads the sheet music over a student's shoulder as he listens, and, bobbing his head in time, seems pleased.

"I think this section actually rocks," he says.

When they hear this, even the sleepest students start to look lively.

In this second year of collaboration with the Euclid, Keranen says he feels as though the master classes have furthered his program's string instruction.

"Whether it's simply reinforcing concepts or introducing something completely new, the Euclid members are professional musicians," Keranen says, "and sometimes teenagers might listen a little closer than they would with their everyday music teacher."

Each spring, the quartet members attend two of the orchestra's rehearsals, adding their professional expertise to the students' practice by pinpointing trouble spots in the music and offering advice for improvement. This morning, the members work with the orchestra as a whole. Next week, they'll take on the students by section, giving more in-depth advice on bowings and fingerings to help the separate parts come together as an ensemble.

"Our students are not exposed regularly to musicianship of this caliber, so they look forward to it," says Keranen. "I think the students also respond well to watching Euclid work together, how they work together as a team to reach their musical goals."

## How the Partnership Began

If these high school students had any preconceptions about professional chamber musicians being old fashioned or "out of touch," the four standing before them—wearing hipster jeans and nerd-chic eyeglasses—put those notions to rest. That's part of the beauty of this program: Through it, young, professional musicians serve as role models for children and teens, showing them just how cool classical music can be.

The Fischhoff's Arts in Education Residencies began in 1995. The program sponsors residencies in Michiana schools with ensembles that participated in the Fischhoff's annual chamber music competition. The average age of Fischhoff competition participants is around 30—old enough to be at the top of their game, but still young enough to relate to student musicians.

For the 2007-08 school year, the Fischhoff worked with Mishawaka school administrators for the first time, offering the elementary schools the chance to participate in the S.A.M.-I-Am program. The interest was so great that a lottery had to be held to determine which school would host the program that year.

"We then realized there was a great demand for an educational outreach program in Mishawaka, the only district with a strings program for all elementary students," says Pam O'Rourke, who directs Fischhoff's educational programs.

Fischhoff decided to try to meet that demand through a special expanded residency program that would connect with more Mishawaka schools.

The Euclid Quartet, an alumnus of the competition, seemed like a natural partner. For the Euclid, the quartet-in-residence at Indiana University South Bend, Mishawaka is practically next door—no need for overnight accommodations or extensive travel.

"We have a treasure in town and a school corporation that was interested, so we wanted to wed those two and make connections," says Ann Divine, Fischhoff's executive director. "We thought, 'Wouldn't it be great to have a laboratory experiment of sorts, documenting whether this interaction would make a difference?'"

Funding for the initiative arrived in the form of a two-year \$100,000 Major Venture Grant from the Community Foundation of St. Joseph County's ArtsEverywhere Fund. Since Fischhoff now had the freedom to stretch out the

## Fischhoff Educators

Building on their commitment to musical education, the Fischhoff National Chamber Music Association will soon launch the Fischhoff Educator Award. This new award will recognize the work of Fischhoff Competition alumni who have developed and implemented outstanding, imaginative programming for children. It's a way of demonstrating Fischhoff's belief that chamber ensembles that can build a successful career in both music performance *and* educational outreach deserve special recognition.

"It's sort of like the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval," says Ann Divine, Fischhoff's executive director. "Shouldn't we provide a 'thank you' to those who are being innovative with education programs in their communities?"

The award includes Fischhoff's endorsement, a cash prize, and a week with Fischhoff's Arts-in-Education residency during the fall of 2011. The residency will take place at selected schools in the region, and, on a smaller scale, will parallel the 2008–2010 Mishawaka residency: a series of master classes for older students and the S.A.M.-I-Am program for the elementary grades.

The award will make winners of both the musicians and local students.

"The residencies bring outside groups in, which benefits our community," says Divine. "The ensembles incorporate humor, and make it fun. It's classical music—and we make no apologies for that—but it's fun."

program over two years, all of Mishawaka's elementary schools were able to receive the S.A.M.-I-Am program. During the first year, S.A.M.-I-Am featured Joan de Déu Prats' book *Sebastian's Roller Skates*; for 2009–10, the students read *The Bee Tree* by Patricia Polacco. Both books are connected to curricula that meet state and federal education standards.

Divine says administrators at School City of Mishawaka cut through any red tape necessary to make the partnership work.

"The Mishawaka schools have been a role model for other school corporations with their responsiveness," she says, appreciatively. "They embraced our organization before we began this, so the foundation for it had already been laid."

More than half of Mishawaka's schools qualify for Title 1 funding, which means that forty percent or more of students at those schools come from families that qualify as low-income under federal guidelines. That makes the residencies even more important, since they bring the expertise of professional musicians to an underserved population.

"These are like surgical strikes: Kids see the musicians working together, perfecting a silent model of democracy," says Divine, whose passion is exposing children to chamber music. "Everyone's equal, and each has a part to play."



## S.A.M.–I–Am: Music Brings the Words to Life

At first glance, *The Bee Tree* is a sweet story about a little girl named Mary Ellen, who is tired of reading indoors, and her grandfather, who knows that a trip to a bee tree is just what she needs for inspiration. Together, Mary Ellen and her grandfather follow a bee along the St. Joseph River in Michigan to discover its hive and honey. Along their way, neighbors—the laughing baby Sylvester, a honking goose, Einar Tundevold and his squeaky bike, a flute-playing goatherd and his flock, and three musicians—join the chase. Once the noisy group finds the bee tree, they enjoy biscuits with honey, tea, and an afternoon party.

It's a good adventure story that's fun to read aloud to children. But imagine how it could be enhanced with a string quartet adding music as the story is told: The cellist plays notes that mimic the honking of a goose, the violins imitate a baby's laugh, and the whole ensemble performs sections from Rimsky-Korsakov's "Flight of the Bumblebee."

Twenty-five hundred students in seven Mishawaka elementary schools enjoyed that experience last fall as the Euclid Quartet provided the musical enrichment. Each class received a copy of the *The Bee Tree*, accompanied by a vocabulary list. Teachers read the book aloud several times prior to the program so that the children would be familiar with the story and the characters.

Then, during the interactive program at each school, the quartet played short musical excerpts during the book's narration, conveying the mood of the story. Afterward, they talked about their instruments and gave the children a chance to ask questions.

Steve Van Bruaene, the principal of Beiger Elementary School, has hosted the program both years. According to him, his students can't get enough of it.

**"Even our strongest players gained a lot from working with [the Euclid]," violist Eric Barbour says. "It also inspired me, personally, to work as hard as I can."**

"This program puts good, quality literature in the classroom, but when you put it to music, it comes alive," Van Bruaene says. "Our kids read the books and know what's coming. Even the fifth and sixth graders, they get laughing too. Our kids can always use more humor and culture—plus the more you read, the more you think. It offers a way of communicating through music."

It's a good time for the quartet, too.

"It feels good to be the ones who've given them that experience, seeing their smiling faces," Cooper says.

Since the students have a chance to get to know the story ahead of time, they develop a considerable level of anticipation, making the performance a really special event.

"It's like we're celebrities," says Murphy.

While it's clear from the students' reactions that they enjoy the program, does it actually increase involvement in Mishawaka's strings programs?

Anecdotally, it seems to. Van Bruaene reports that students tell him they're taking up orchestra after being inspired by the S.A.M.–I–Am program. And it stays with them beyond the week that it occurs: Just recently, he overheard a group of kindergartners talking about the program in class.

Pam O'Rourke tells a story about a strings student who participated in the All-Strings Concert last April, the year's culminating event in which the Euclid Quartet performs with all the Mishawaka student musicians who participate in the program. She brought her little sister with her to listen to the concert.



"Her younger sibling was telling anyone who would listen," O'Rourke says, "that *she* would be playing her *own* instrument next year."

For her part, Divine hopes that the two-year span of the program will provide clear data that such interaction with students makes a real impact. Right now, she says, the association with Euclid and the Mishawaka schools is at a crossroads. More discussions regarding funding are on the horizon.

"The Euclid Quartet would love to continue. The schools would love to continue, and they're already asking what the book for next fall will be," she says. "One advantage to another year of funding would be hard figures on where there's been an increase in student participation thanks to this collaboration."

## Creating Music—and an Audience

Back at Mishawaka High School's master class, senior Eric Barbour, the principal violist in the school's symphonic orchestra, says the chance to interact with members of the Euclid has made a definite difference for him and the school's other musicians.

"Even our strongest players gained a lot from working with them," he says. "It also inspired me, personally, to work as hard as I can toward being a better musician. I aspire to be at their level of talent one day, but obviously nothing comes without a lot of hard work. Still, working with the quartet shows that years of hard work and somewhat tedious practice can really pay off."

"[The fact] that the Mishawaka schools even have a strings program is no small feat," says Murphy. "The students are enthusiastic, and the best thing we can do is foster a continued enthusiasm and give them the tools to sustain that."

"It's a shot in the arm, boosting what's already going on and showing them the wider possibilities," says Cooper.

There's an additional upside for the quartet, as well: The program develops not only music students, but music consumers.

"Anyone who wants to have a future *performing* classical music," says Murphy, wisely, before he heads off to a quartet rehearsal, "needs to ensure there's an *audience* for classical music." ●●●

*Paige Risser is a freelance writer and public relations consultant based in South Bend.*