

Building The Stringed Instrument Market

By expanding the ranks of qualified teachers, the National String Project Consortium creates new market opportunities for retailers and manufacturers



For years sales of stringed instruments, as with school band instruments, closely tracked school enrollment. (See article on page 52.) But recently orchestral string sales have climbed disproportionately, suggesting that there might be new learning outlets for those who play violin, viola, cello, and double bass. The precise cause of this trend is hard to pinpoint, but one promising contributor is the National String Project Consortium (NSPC).

A 2002 American String Teachers Association (ASTA) study reported that there were 5,000 unfilled positions for stringed instrument teachers in the U.S., and that between 2000 and 2002 the percentage of unfilled stringed instru-

ment teacher jobs rose from 24% to 47%. The study also noted that string teachers were aging, and absent a drive to recruit new teachers, market decline was inevitable.

Responding to this challenge, in 1999 ASTA helped establish NSPC, whose mission is to train university undergraduate students in teaching primary school students to play orchestral strings. Now an independent non-profit organization, NSPC has established 35 string projects in 25 states. Combined, the program's corps of college students has taught more than 7,000 children.

NSPC classes are taught at colleges and universities by undergraduate music majors starting in their freshman year. Third- and fourth-grade children meet

after school twice a week throughout the school year in a large, heterogeneous beginners' class. In their second year they advance to smaller classes focusing on their chosen instrument (violin, viola, cello, or double bass) one day a week but recombine for full-orchestra performances on a second day. The students begin supplementing their classes with private lessons in their third year. The programs continue through high school. Many NSPC projects form higher-level orchestras for the primary school students reaching their fifth and sixth years in the program. For example, at the University of South Carolina, three String Project orchestras feed into two South Carolina Philharmonic youth orchestras.

"At one time increasing the number of



string players was considered a chicken-or-egg question,” says ASTA Past President and NSPC Executive Director Bob Jesselson: “What comes first, developing children’s desire to play strings so the teachers have students, or developing teachers to teach and inspire those children? We decided that the lack of qualified teachers was a big part of the problem.”

NSPC is based on two model programs launched decades earlier. The first was at the University of Texas at Austin. The second was established in 1974 at the University of South Carolina, where Jesselson is a distinguished professor. At that time there were no public school string programs in the University’s home city, Columbia. Today there are string programs in every Columbia public elementary, middle, and high school, reaching some 3,000 students. Since the NSPC project began being rolled out nationally in 1999, other cities have seen similarly encouraging growth of school orchestras.

Music education majors typically receive one semester of practical class training. By contrast, NSPC student teachers get four or five years, in Jesselson’s words, “under the supervision of a master teacher, so they graduate as seasoned teachers, truly well trained and ready to handle a public school program from day one.” Two positive effects are fewer bad teachers and

reduced attrition. Jesselson emphasizes, “The people who finish the NSPC programs are really committed to being string instrument teachers. Some 78% of the USC students who completed the NSPC program are still teaching, compared with the national average of 50% in the first five years of teaching.”

NSPC’s affordability is changing the face of playing stringed instruments. The classes cost each child just \$40 or \$50 per semester. “We want to get away from the idea that playing stringed instruments is elitist,” says Jesselson. “Because the classes are inexpensive, we get a lot of participation among disadvantaged kids and various minority groups. A new program that just started at Wayne State University in Detroit drew 120 kids in its first year, many of them minorities.”

Getting word of the classes out to the public remains one of NSPC’s challenges. Each August the host universities place ads in the local newspapers and sometimes on radio. Around the same time NSPC teachers visit the public schools, demonstrate the instruments, and perform to generate interest. An organizational meeting is then arranged for the parents to sign up their kids. Music retailers, who clearly can benefit from an NSPC program in their area, are invited to encourage participation by their customers.

Since 1999 NSPC has been funded

through grants totaling about \$2.7 million. Major supporters include NAMM, the D’Addario Foundation, *Strings* magazine, William Harris Lee, and the Dana Foundation, as well as the National Endowment for the Arts. Under the organization’s model, start-up and incubation costs of \$13,500, which are matched by the host the university, are required for each new NSPC project site. Sites become financially self-sufficient after five years.

Jesselson says local music retailers “help with publicity and the cost of printing concert programs. They’ve been very supportive, and they benefit by getting the business from both the college student teachers and all their students.” NSPC estimates that its projects have generated \$1.2 million in instrumental rentals alone.

Historically stringed instruments have been assumed to appeal to a narrower swath of society than standard band instruments. The fact that only 16% of school districts in the U.S. currently have string programs suggests tremendous room for development. But with so much thought and effort devoted to creating an interest in playing music in general, it is perhaps instructive that a huge groundswell of interest in stringed instruments has only been awaiting the catalyst of long-absent opportunity and resources.

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