

## A SOUTH CAROLINA PROFESSOR IS DOING ALL HE CAN...

**ROBERT JESSELSON**, professor of cello at the University of South Carolina, is the kind of person who sees a problem and tackles it with dogged tenacity. And with him, there are always strings attached.

More than 25 years ago, as a new music professor at USC, Jesselson discovered some unsettling statistics about the lack of string teachers in neighboring public schools, rolled up his sleeves, and began to investigate. The result of his tireless research—and many subsequent brainstorming sessions and grant proposals—is USC's String Project, a program that not only gives undergraduate music majors real-world teaching experience but also educates children who otherwise might miss out on string instruction altogether. That first initiative has blossomed into the National String Project Consortium, a network of university-affiliated string teacher training programs that is now thriving in 35 cities.

"When I came to USC in 1981," Jesselson recalls, "I had one cello student the first semester, and then that student switched majors. I realized I had some work to do." As he began the task of rebuilding USC's string program, he quickly noticed that string teachers were hard to come by in his adopted hometown of Columbia, South Carolina.

# ... IN THE SERVICE OF STRINGS

BY CATHERINE APPLEFELD OLSON

Robert Jesselson  
duets with University  
of South Carolina  
student Elizabeth Riley



The 2009 University of South Carolina Cello Choir

Once he began to dig, he says, the urgency of the situation across the country became overwhelming. “I didn’t realize right away there was this shortage, and I don’t think the profession as a whole knew a lot about it,” he explains. A research project conducted in 2000 by the American String Teachers Association (during Jesselson’s two-year stint as pres-

ident of that organization) turned up some startling numbers: 24 percent of string teaching jobs weren’t currently filled, with a projected 43 percent dearth in 2001 and a 47 percent void in 2002. A followup study is set to be released this fall and will reveal “some interesting differences eight years later,” he notes.

“It’s ridiculous. Our country is so fo-

cused on producing high-level players, but these people have no sense of reality about the job situation,” Jesselson maintains. “And meanwhile, there is a complete lack of qualified teachers to fill open jobs in the public schools.”

USC’s String Project, itself based on a program developed in the 1940s at the University of Texas at Austin, seeks to empower music majors who want to teach. The idea is to put these students in classes, lessons, rehearsals, and everyday experiences with kids. “Teaching in public schools is different from private teaching,” Jesselson acknowledges. “People have to be trained to do that, and the String Project trains them so they are ready to go when the jobs become open.”

According to Jesselson, the number of String Project veterans who continue on as string teachers after college is more than 70 percent. The Project also is turning out to be a catalyst for another invaluable service: getting string programs into public schools. “There were no string programs in Columbia when the String Project started, and now every elementary, middle, and high school has a string and orchestra program,” Jesselson points out. “Parents would bring their children to the university for classes, and then those parents demanded some [string instruction] in their children’s public school. When one school would start a program, the others wanted one too. It was a domino effect.”

Today, USC’s string program is flourishing and Jesselson wears “only” two hats: cello professor and head of the National String Project Consortium. He also leads the South Carolina Cello Choir, which brings together cellists from around the country for an annual weekend of performance. The program

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launched 29 years ago with fewer than 20 musicians. This year, he expects 250.

Considering the profound effect he’s had on string instruction across the country, it’s interesting to note that Jesselson’s own route into music education was rather circuitous. He started off studying anthropology and linguistics at the University of Buffalo, then moved to Germany, where he began studying cello—an instrument he’d only toyed with as a child.

“Most people know they’re going to be musicians from age 10; my path was not so straight,” he says. “But this was in the ’60s. People were exploring a lot



A private lesson with student Kristian Ring

of different things.”

Jesselson went on to study at the conservatory in Freiburg, then took a job as principal cellist in an orchestra in the Canary Islands. He returned to the States to

get his master’s at Eastman School of Music, and had been teaching at Montana State for two years when the opportunity at USC came up. His later start in music turned out to be a boon to him as an educator: “I was 21 when I started, and because I started so late and had to think about everything and analyze what I was doing technically, I found I could explain things to others very well.”

Now a well-seasoned teacher, Jesselson has taken note of some profound changes in the string world over time. First and foremost is the quality of performance. “The level of playing continues to go up,” he says. “It’s just astounding how someone who was considered a really fine player 50 years ago is now only pretty average. It’s a real joy to see how the profession has progressed.”

Of course, Jesselson is quick to connect the dots between this progress, the teachers behind it, and the organizations that bring those teachers together. This summer Jesselson celebrated 25 years as an active member of MENC, and participated in a panel on community-oriented music programs at Music Education Week in Washington, DC.

Yet despite the successes, Jesselson is far from exhaling. With each participating String Project university graduating only a handful of students each year, there is still much work to be done. “If we are really going to address the critical shortage of string teachers in the nation, we need to create more of these programs,” he says. “Thirty-five is just not enough.”

## Q&A with Robert Jesselson



**Q What’s the best piece of advice you’ve received regarding the profession of teaching music?**

**A** Perhaps the most important piece of advice came from a faculty colleague for whom I had virtually no respect. When I first came to the school and was working hard to build and improve the string area, he told me, “Just wait until you have tenure, then you’ll stop working so hard.” It was at that moment that I decided to devote myself to my students and never give less than 110 percent.

**Q What do you know to be true about teaching music today that you did not know when you started?**

**A** There is a Swedish proverb that goes: “The Afternoon knows what the Morning can not.” I have learned so

much from my students over the years, and one of the great joys of my life now is to hear back from my former students about their own lives in music.

**Q If I weren’t a music teacher I...**

**A** ...would possibly have become an anthropologist (that was my undergraduate major), or maybe a linguist (my minor), or a radio announcer (I worked for NPR as a “stringer” in the early days of the network, was an announcer on WBFO in Buffalo, and was on the “graveyard” shift of WXXI in Rochester for several years).

**Q Music education at the university level would be better if...**

**A** Music education majors always received as much instructional time and energy as performance majors. As it is now, many universities

create an oversupply of performance majors for the few available jobs. Colleges often provide hour lessons for the performance majors and only a half-hour for the education majors. At my school, we treat all our string students the same—they get full lessons, master classes, performance opportunities, etc.—in the belief that those who will be teaching in the schools need to become the most competent and best possible musicians in order to pass on their competency and knowledge to the next generation.



Jesselson and his 2009 cello students

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