

# Calling out for classroom teachers

As a study highlights the need for 3,000 new string instructors in US public schools by 2013, **Peter Somerford** looks at the reasons for the shortage and what is being done to address it

**THE US NEEDS 1,000 NEW STRING** teachers every year for the next three years. That is the headline projection from the latest research into string and orchestra programmes in the nation's public schools. The 2009 study by string education researchers Michael Alexander and Bret Smith is highlighted in a white paper newly released by the National String Project Consortium (NSPC), an organisation trying to address the nationwide shortage of string teachers.

The white paper paints a mixed picture. A similar study produced in 2002 projected that 5,000 new teachers would be needed by 2005, so the current estimate of 3,000 needed by 2013 shows that the shortage is diminishing. Another positive development is an increase in the number of school districts offering string



A young pupil is given a helping hand at an NSPC string project run by Ithaca College in New York

COURTESY NSPC

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programmes: whereas in 2000 the figure was 18 per cent, now it is 29 per cent. But on the negative side, the number of positions being filled by teachers whose primary instrument is not a stringed instrument is on the rise; programme add-ons such as string quartet coaching are declining; and two thirds of string programmes saw financial support from their school districts decrease between 2003 and 2008.

The NSPC's network of 36 string projects at colleges and universities across the US provides teaching experience to around 320 undergraduates each year. Despite the organisation's success at increasing the number of music education graduates at its project sites, NSPC executive director Robert Jesselson recognises that addressing the acute teacher shortage will be a challenge. 'In a few years' time we're going to have a huge wave of vacancies, because many teachers are becoming old enough to retire,

and those teachers hanging on in their jobs because of the recession will feel able to retire as the economy improves. It's vital that we fill those vacancies with competent, specialised string teachers, but right now there just aren't enough training programmes to produce them.'

One of Jesselson's goals is for all 50 US states to have at least one NSPC string project, and he is working to convince more universities of the value of hosting a programme. 'We need them to understand that their role is not just about promoting the performance part of our art. There are enough music students in the country – that's not the problem. But most of them think of themselves as performers and want to go as far as possible on their instrument. That is great in itself, but they still have to think practically when it comes to finding work. And for society, it's a shame that all these people are being encouraged to join the profession as performers when there are so few jobs.'

One of the study's authors, Bret Smith, who teaches music education at Central Washington University, agrees that the profession needs to do more to help students at least consider the career and personal benefits of teaching. 'We should

think about the messages given out by the instructors who the students look up to, who in many cases are the private, high-level performer-teachers. The role model of the dynamic, highly skilled schools teacher isn't present enough to be a viable influence.'

While Jesselson thinks the call for teachers should also go out beyond the US to students and instructors overseas, Smith is seeing welcome signs at home of music education students returning to university to gain higher-level skills, and private teachers and performers interested in returning to qualify as public school teachers. He also points to an established demand-and-supply cycle in the training of new teachers, whereby the job demand for teachers creates the need for specialist university instruction, which in turn is met by staffing decisions taken by the universities.

Smith warns that some universities are facing extensive budget cuts, but argues, 'It's important that they hang on to their specialist music education programmes. The NSPC has had a big impact on pre-graduation training, but sustaining momentum in terms of recruiting and training specialised string teachers needs to be a priority for everyone.'

# Building the future

**Ariane Todes** encountered fighting talk and inspiring progress despite financial worries at the American string teachers' convention in California

THERE WERE TWO CONFERENCES held in the same weekend at the Santa Clara Hyatt – the American String Teachers Association (ASTA) convention, and the World Financial Group's Building the Future gathering. It was pretty easy to tell the delegates apart, the latter sporting sleek suits and dark glasses, and not even blinking at the price of the hotel meals. But the former were equally concerned with the future, and world finances. There was talk of cuts to programmes, but the atmosphere was overwhelmingly positive. With seminars such as Protecting Your Program and Getting Grants and other Funding to Supplement Your String Program, the talk was fighting.

If anyone personifies the battle, it's John Benham, who was honoured with the ASTA Arts Advocacy Award on the

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Thursday night. Benham is a consultant responsible for preventing over \$60m of cuts to music programmes, translating to education for 300,000 students. He helps music teachers use logic and business sense with their school boards. One argument runs that if you calculate the cost of several teachers teaching a hundred students over a few hours, it proves cheaper for them all to be in one music group led by one conductor: and bingo – you save your programme.

The benefits of this argument could be witnessed in the National Orchestra Festival, which ran alongside the seminars. It provided great pleasure (and sometimes a welcome break from brain overload) to pop into the rehearsals of the young groups and witness the enormous commitment and discipline. Mark Lacock's session on Fostering Collaborative Rehearsals might have provided their conductors with excellent rehearsal advice,



asking teachers, 'How many creative opportunities do we offer our students every day?' and urging them to encourage this creativity. There was an inspiring session about Great Teaching Moments in the String Project, with various schools presenting proof of the ground that the National String Project Consortium has made recently in reversing the decline in the number of string teachers (see Analysis, page 13). An interesting knock-on effect for some schools has been start-up adult classes to cater for parents who want to be involved in their children's progress.

Parental involvement was a key message in Successful Strategies for Establishing New String/Orchestra Programs, given by teachers who have formed some of the hundred new programmes started since 1999. Karin Hendricks described how she harnessed 'parent power' in a small community to gather enough names of potential violin players to convince the superintendents to start a programme. From there, it's down to making the programme 'cool' enough that kids sell it to their friends, developing good relationships with local music shops, and interacting with

private studios rather than competing. The determination and passion that such teachers manifest is awe-inspiring.

As ever at ASTA conventions, the hardest part was choosing seminars, with a huge range of subjects available at any time. Highlights included an interesting explanation of how to break in new strings in five minutes using lots of friction by Thomastik's Franz Klanner; a salutary warning about the dangers of permanent hearing loss by James Hainlen, the moral being that prevention is key; and an intricate comparison of the various string teaching methods on the US market by Nola Campbell that demonstrated the range of needs involved in string teaching – and how surprisingly hard it is to fulfil them all.

There seemed to be fewer exhibitors than last year, but the trade hall was nevertheless busy and at times full with the many students who were part of the festival, ambling among the stands. Late one afternoon I came across a group of uniformed teenagers by a luthier's stall, busking through Mozart's Divertimento in D major on a set of new instruments as if it were the coolest thing in the world – building the future indeed.