



String Department Showcase

Alexandria Public Schools
by Brian Cole

A new feature in String Notes is the String Department Showcase where each issue will include an article about a string department in Minnesota. And although there are many more programs in the metropolitan area, we will alternate between in-state and out-state programs.

Alexandria, Minnesota, is located 130 miles northwest of Minneapolis on Interstate 94. Rich in arts tradition and excellence, the city of 13,000 is known for its lakes and summer tourism industry. 3M, Alexandria Vo-Tech and the school district are three of the larger employers in the area.

The string program in Alexandria begins in the summer before the student's fifth grade year and continues through high school. There are two full time staff in the district: Peggy Atwood teaches at the Junior High and Dean Dainsberg teaches at the High School. Both of them spend time in the elementary schools.

The district has one high school (10-12), one junior high school (7-9), and eight elementary schools. The eight elementary schools consists of three city, two parochial and three rural sites which include Garfield, Carols, and Miltona.

Students are recruited in the spring of their fourth grade year. Both Atwood and Dainsberg visit all elementary students with members of the high school strolling strings group for a 20 to 25 minute presentation. Students and parents then attend a parent meeting and students are fitted for instruments.

The beginning students attend an innovative camp in June. Atwood stated that the summer program has been a real draw for several years. Students come for three and a half hours each day for three weeks. During that time block the students attend: a lesson in groups of 7 to 8, a piano keyboarding class where they learn to visualize half and whole steps, a music theory class where all music

notation is discussed and therefore saves time in the lesson group, an ear training/music listening class taught by the choral staff, and a large orchestra experience at the end of the day. Although there are some students who do not continue playing in orchestra after the camp experience, Atwood added that it has been a popular and rewarding program that the community supports.

The elementary and junior high schedules are on a six day rotation which allows students in the elementary to have two lessons in every six day cycle and the junior high students one lesson in every cycle. Lessons last from 20 to 25 minutes. Where at all possible, student are placed in like instrument groups for their lessons.

The junior high music facilities are some of the finest in the state. The orchestra has its own rehearsal room and several practice rooms. A beautiful performing auditorium is adjacent to the music department. This auditorium has been a host for several regional and state festivals including the MNSOTA Junior High/Middle School Orchestra Festival.

All for Strings is the method book used in the elementary and at the junior high, although Atwood added that in the near future she would like to experiment with one of the new method books available. In the junior high, Atwood supplements *All for Strings* with *Solo Time for Strings* which is also published by Kjos. Atwood likes *Solo Time for Strings* as she has found that junior high age students are more motivated to play technique exercises that take up a whole page rather than the one and two line ditties that grace the pages of most method books.

The high school is on a six period day with each class lasting about 55 minutes. Dainsberg mentioned that it is difficult for high school students to be in more than one music activity although they do take advantage of the early bird period

and summer school classes.

Students at the high school are on a pull out lessons situation in groups of two or three. Each quarter they take five lessons with Dainsberg. It is on a rotational basis with students coming out of period 1 one week, period 2 the next, and so on. There is a magnetic lesson schedule in the orchestra room where the week's lessons are arranged. If a student is unable to leave class due to a test or presentation they take their magnetic strip and move it to another slot. This is a most effective way to honor teacher and student needs.

The Rainbow Strings is a strolling strings groups that performs for numerous community functions including dinner parties, holiday gatherings, Mother's Day banquets, and church functions. The 12 member group is chosen on the basis of auditions in the fall of the school year.

The district rents violas, cellos and basses for \$20.00 a year and encourages the players, especially viola players, to purchase instruments when they have completed their physical growth.

Very few of the district's orchestra students take private lessons outside the school as there is a shortage of teachers in town. In the past some students have traveled to the Fargo-Moorhead area or to St. Cloud for lessons.

The elementary program has two concerts a year: one in November and the All City at the end of the year. The junior high orchestra gives three concerts, two of which are combined with the band program. The high school orchestra gives four concerts a year. During the holiday concert, the orchestra adds winds and percussion for a full orchestra experience.

This is a program which is serving both its students and its community. Having spent time around the staff and students, it is obvious that there is a common thread of pride and excellence that runs throughout the program. Alexandria

is to be commended for its long-standing commitment to arts education. Its community has done much not only to support the program, but make it thrive as well.

Brian Cole teaches 5th and 6th grade orchestra at the

Robert Asp School in Moorhead. Currently co-editor of String Notes, Cole received his graduate degree from the University of Northern Colorado and his bachelors from the University of South Dakota. ‡