

"Ensemble Evening" A Community Endeavor

by Christine Whyatt

The fifth annual Ensemble Evening is scheduled for Sunday, February 5, 2001, at the Merriam Park Music Studio in St. Paul. It is the biggest event of the year and consistently draws over a hundred people. The Studio is housed in St. Mary's Episcopal Church, a lovely community-oriented church with a Yoga Studio and a Nursery School also on its premises. Ensemble Evening not only draws families, but extended families and friends often come for the performance and the potluck that follows. It began several years ago with an idea that I shared with my colleagues.

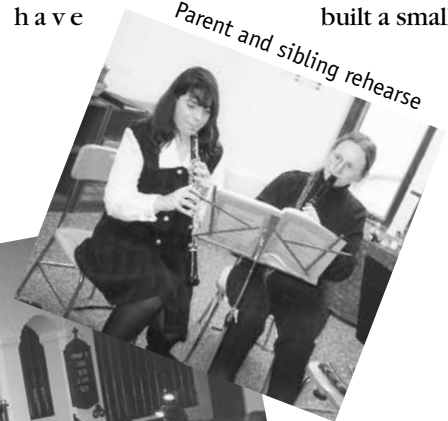
As the coordinator of the Music Studio, I was looking for ways to bring families together and reinforce a sense of community in our program by involving parents and siblings as well as our students in making music together. Like most music schools or programs, many of our students come from musical families with other members who play instruments either professionally or as a hobby. I envisioned one evening where our combined studios could rehearse in small groups, play for each other and share a meal together. What I suggested sounded almost absurd at the time — renting the entire church for an evening

of music making. The three of us — David Holmes, cello; Erika Sacks-White, violin, viola; and myself — discussed the logistics of assigning groups to nearly everyone who plays an instrument, the challenge of finding music appropriate for mixed instrument ensembles at all levels and getting experienced parents to help us lead ensembles. We decided to try it out anyway, but not without some trepidation. We scheduled this event for a Sunday evening in late January after the holidays were over and simply referred to it as Ensemble Evening. It took a considerable amount of planning

to everyone except the new families in our studios. Weeks before the event, we put out sign-up sheets for parents in our studios asking for their help in leading an ensemble or playing in an ensemble (if they have musical backgrounds). All three of us make a big effort to generate enthusiasm and make sure all our students participate. We also inquire about siblings, their ages, instruments and playing level. Then we set out mixing instruments and organizing the ensembles. We have built a small



Students rehearse



Parent and sibling rehearse



Parents perform



Ten cellists in concert

and hard work by all three of us, but with the tremendous support of our parents who lead ensembles, set up rehearsal rooms, and served on the food and clean-up committees, the evening went smoothly, turned out to be a rewarding experience and one we wanted to do again. That was five years ago!

We have worked out a format that is easy to follow and is now familiar

but adequate library of chamber music over the years and select most of our music from this collection. We also raid our own music files for pieces that are enjoyable and not too difficult. The music is then handed out at the lessons where we help students and encourage them to start preparing it for the upcoming event. The evening provides another opportunity to expose students to chamber music and sharpen their reading skills. There is also an option for the students to participate in a folk ensemble with the guitarists and other folk musicians in our studios. A couple of weeks before the event, we set out a sign-up sheet with committees and tasks including food service, clean-up, set-up, etc. Parents are encouraged to

serve on the committees and every family also signs up to bring a dessert, salad, or entree to share at the potluck dinner at the end of the evening.

On the day of the event, families arrive in the late afternoon and go directly to their assigned rehearsal spaces. Rooms are set up and leaders have instructions to help get the group rehearsing. Parents without a musical background or those with small children have a special activity planned for them. Last year an outside teacher came in to teach simple folk dances. In other years we have had the VCR set up with a film to watch such as *Beethoven Lives Upstairs* or *Nurtured by Love*. After one hour of rehearsing, the groups choose one or two short pieces to perform for

each other in the sanctuary. These are usually not polished performances but often spontaneous and enjoyable. Young children clap to bluegrass music or chuckle when parents lose their place in the music or play alongside younger more accomplished players. The mood is informal and light.

After the performances, everyone gathers in the activity room for a potluck supper. The food has been a highlight of the evening over the years with many ethnic dishes and plenty of food kids like. It is satisfying to see families interacting and conversing at dinner tables, and children laughing and playing together after dinner. Many new acquaintances and friendships are made during the course of the evening,

Our community of musicians and their families have bonded together, at least for one evening.

Christine Whyatt is the coordinator of the Merriam Park Music Studio in St. Paul where she teaches violin and fiddle. She has served on the board of the Suzuki Association of Minnesota and has published articles in the SAM Newsletter and the American Suzuki Journal. She performs with Allegro Sinfonia in Wayzata and plays with the Spelmanslag at the American Swedish Institute. ‡

[If you have a unique event in your school or program, please write it up to share with our membership. Ed.]