



# School Orchestra

## Strolling Strings: An Interview with Beth Gilbert

by Mary Wagner

*This is one chapter from Getting it Right from the Start: A Guide to Beginning and Enriching a Successful String Orchestra Program edited by Kathlene Goodrich and Mary Wagner, newly available from ASTA WITH NSOA. The entire publication is a huge loose leaf collection 4-5" thick, full of ideas well worth the \$30.95 price. For more information, contact MENC Publications Sales, 1806 Robert Fulton Drive, Reston VA 20191, or visit [www.astaweb.com](http://www.astaweb.com).*

### How do you start a strolling strings program?

You just need to sell it to a few students. I began a program at a new school this past year with 10 students. You need to make sure the kids and the parents are committed so it will fly. Everyone needs to be at rehearsals and performances! If you don't get a lot of paying jobs the first year, go out and play for free. Make sure you hand out business cards. If the performance is of good quality, the word will spread.

### How does the string program benefit by having a strolling program?

The string program benefits in many ways. The strolling group is very high profile (like the marching band at football games). Many people from throughout the community become aware that there is a string program in the schools and that it is of excellent quality. My group plays for approximately 2000 people a year who would not know about the program in the elementary schools. I have had many students tell me they signed up to play an instrument because they saw the strolling group when they were in third grade and wanted to be able to play like that. The string program also receives many musical benefits from students strolling. Their musical skills increase greatly — they learn to listen better and play as an ensemble. They also learn to play with better tone quality and intonation improves. They develop more poise and stage presence.

### Do all students stroll?

The only students I want in the strolling group are those who really want to be there. It is a big commitment

for students and parents, and they need to be sure they are prepared to make the group a first priority. As far as the playing goes, the student needs to be able to handle performing the music from memory and moving and doing facial expressions at the same time.

### Do you need a pianist?

A pianist is necessary to hold the ensemble together when the string players are spread throughout a large room. The piano is the foundation of the group.

### Do your cellists stroll?

I have only one cellist who chose to stroll. For most junior high school cellists, the music is difficult to memorize because it is not melody, and they are more comfortable sitting and playing in their regular position. I have always left the decision up to the cellists. As a cellist myself, I found it very uncomfortable to play for a long period of time with the cello hanging from my neck.

### Do you rehearse during school or outside the school day?

I have done both. Mostly, we have rehearsed outside of the school day, but it makes it more difficult to find students available to do so. For some years, my group rehearsed during one of the lunch periods instead of attending a silent sustained reading class. It was ideal because it opened the strolling group to anyone who wanted to do it.

### How much time is needed for rehearsals?

This has varied over the years also. Generally, at least 45 minutes three days a week is needed to begin. I will often

cut back to two days a week after the program is learned.

### How do you teach memorization?

The students and parents know going in that the music needs to be memorized. I talk with them about different ways to memorize and tell them to use whatever works for them. We also do activities in the rehearsal that will help them memorize. I work with students one-on-one if they are experiencing difficulties.

### How do you come up with strolling routines?

The strolling routines generally come to me at gigs. I'll be watching the ensemble and think of something new to try at the next rehearsal. I may throw out ideas or the kids may add to them. We try different things to see what will work best. I find it helpful to walk through the routine with no music or instruments to begin with.

### Do you know of any books or clinics that might help teachers interested in beginning a strolling program?

*Getting Started with Strolling Strings* (published by MENC) is probably the most helpful book I know. I have also attended and presented workshops on the subject. Probably the quickest way to get a good understanding is to see a strolling group in action and talk to experienced teachers.

### Is strolling a good fundraiser, and what types of performances do you do?

Strolling strings is an excellent fundraiser. Which would you rather do — sell candy or perform music for very

appreciative audiences? During the 16 years I was at Kino Junior High School, I never had to do any fundraising because the strolling group provided all the funds we needed. We have performed at every type of event imaginable. We have performed for Phoenix Symphony Guild dinners and luncheons, governor's conferences, political din-

ners, military balls, wedding receptions, resort functions, and many more.

**What are some of your favorite musical selections for strolling?**

My favorite musical selections which work best for strolling come from the *Strolling String* books arranged by James "Red" McLeod. All of

the pieces are excellent. A couple of my favorites include *Shamrock Celebration* and *Feudin' Fiddles*.

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