



# ORCHESTRA

## A Conversation with Mark Wood

by Dan Mollick

*About Mark Wood: Electrify Your Symphony Founder and President, inventor of the Viper electric violin, and international recording artist Mark Wood brings a level of expertise and knowledge that will enhance and complement the foundation you've created for your students. His extensive background in the music industry is an invaluable resource and includes his work with the multi platinum-selling Trans-Siberian Orchestra (having performed for millions of people in their annual sold-out arena tours), Celine Dion, Billy Joel, and countless others. (Source: <https://www.electrifyyoursymphony.com/about>)*

Mark Wood and Greg Byers will be working and performing with all students from Edina Public Schools February 14–16, 2023. This will culminate with a live rock concert on Thursday, February 16 in the Edina High School Activities Center. Having worked with Mark on his previous visit to Edina, it was my pleasure to sit down and chat with him to discuss his background, teaching philosophy, and his program, *Electrify Your Symphony*.

**Dan Mollick:** I read that you come from a very musical family. Can you share a little bit about that?

**Mark Wood:** Talking about our families is a real integral part of defining who we are. And I am the luckiest person in the world because we can't choose our families or our parents. So out of nowhere, I flew in from the universe. My mother's a concert pianist who studied at Oberlin Conservatory and my father's a well-known artist. And my mom had four boys in four years. So we had the first all-brothers string quartet in the 1960s and 1970s. And that was the beginning of my life as a creative thinker. What was happening in that period of time was that after I played Beethoven and Mozart and Brahms quartets with my brothers, I would go home and put on my headphones and listen to The Beatles, Led Zeppelin, Jimi Hendrix, Eddie Van Halen, and I would listen to rock music alongside classical music. So, classical music

and rock had the same impact on me. My brothers ended up being professional orchestra musicians in the classical field and I wanted to be a rock string player. I wasn't interested in pursuing classical music and needed to do my own thing.

**DM:** I was reading that you have performed with quite a few famous musicians including Celine Dion and Billy Joel. Do you have any memorable performances with those musicians?

**MW:** The most memorable was [working with] Celine Dion who unfortunately recently announced that she has a very obscure disease of paralysis where she cannot sing anymore. But about 30 years ago, I worked with her closely on her first couple of records and she was just magnificent. When I toured with her, the rest of the band would disappear and it was just me and Celine Dion on stage. And there was this song about a romantic relationship with a violin player. So we would snuggle up every night in front of 50,000 people and play *To Love You More* and every single night I couldn't believe my luck.



with students?

**MW:** First of all, why am I interested in going into a school environment? When I played at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame

with the Trans-Siberian Orchestra, a teacher came up to me and asked me if I would put together a Trans-Siberian Orchestra-type situation with her high school in Cleveland. And what I experienced with this teacher was fantastic. So for 25 years, we've been going into schools sharing and collaborating with our great traditional orchestra programs which are driven by classical music. It really gives us an opportunity to collaborate and share a much more diverse outlook on music.

We're experiencing a cultural shift that we haven't seen in maybe a hundred years with classical music, culture, and communities and it's so important that we have these orchestra programs. As you know, less than 20% of the high schools in the United States even have a string program. Music is about bringing people together and sitting next to somebody who is a completely different person, different color, different religion, different political standing and gives us an opportunity for us to be one with the audience.

**DM:** You have this quote on your website, "Every child deserves to be a rockstar." Can you talk a little bit about that?

**MW:** It's shining a bright light on each individual and celebrating not only their ability to play Mozart and their ability to play classical music but equally important, their ability to express their personal story. The rock star mentality is about celebrating the individual. Now what's great about classical music is that we can be one with a hundred people. I love the whole mentality of being one but we have to balance that with the individual. [Our program] asks, "What is *your* story?"

I learned how to improvise and learned to express myself as my *own* story and that's the message for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Releasing

the inner power of individual expression is the pinnacle of that. Unfortunately, 85% of our string players quit after high school, never to play again. And I think that that's a shame. We need to teach [students] how to communicate as a jazz musician, a rock musician, a hip hop musician, a Celtic musician, an Indian musician, or an African musician so that they can experience that beauty.

**DM:** Why should an orchestra teacher bring you into their school?

**MW:** Collaboration. The partnership and collaboration with the string teacher is really, *really* important and the advantage is bringing in something that's totally different from what they do. I don't do what these great teachers do. I don't do what you do. What you do is an incredible feat of impossibility... I don't know how you do it! I believe that professionals must go into schools because the future is these kids. They are the future. So it takes a village and I firmly believe that. The teachers, I would guess maybe 80% of the teachers have no clue about how I do what I do and that's a power.

Speaking the language of the teacher is

really important. We all have very similar goals and teaching models. But what is different is the performance. I talk about the "performance face" and the "practice face." I say, "All right, kids, I'm looking at you and you look like you're practicing. See that look. What's the performance face? Give that to me. Share with me the body language [for the performance]." The key is to see the collaboration between the two arts forms.

I tell these kids I was a viola player in a middle school orchestra. I am just like you, and I came exactly from where you are. I had no clue how to improvise during my time in high school. So we talk about the similarities of us so they don't look at me as being this alien from another planet.

**DM:** Last question: What is up next for you?

**MW:** I'm touring my new Mark Wood *TSO Experience* show. In the next year, we are doing shows in performing arts centers and theaters, and we're doing classic rock favorites—but the orchestral version. We will be performing symphonic versions of Led Zeppelin, the Beatles as well as rock versions

of Stravinsky and Prokofiev. It's really cool!

If you are interested in further exploring the benefits of bringing Mark Wood to your school, you can check out the *Electrify Your Symphony* website: <https://www.electrifyyoursymphony.com>

As a MNSOTA member, the Edina Orchestra Team would like to offer you up to two complimentary tickets to see the performance in person on Thursday, February 16 at 7:30 P.M. at the Edina High School Activities Center. Please note that availability is limited. If you are interested in attending the performance or you would like details on planning and budgeting from a teacher perspective, feel free to reach out to Dan Mollick ([daniel.mollick@edinaschools.org](mailto:daniel.mollick@edinaschools.org)) or Nick Gaudette ([nick.gaudette@edinaschools.org](mailto:nick.gaudette@edinaschools.org))

*Dan Mollick teaches 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade orchestra at Valley View Middle School in Edina and conducts GTCYS Concertino West Orchestra. He lives in St. Louis Park with his husband, Greg, and rescue pitbull, Sadie. ♪*