

# SOMETHING NEW IN THE SOUTH

by Jacob Crosby

On April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2024, something new was happening in Southern Minnesota. On this unassuming Saturday, Albert Lea High School was full of activity. From 8:00 in the morning until 4:00 in the afternoon, middle school orchestra students from southern Minnesota and northern Iowa were seen in auditions, sectionals, and rehearsals, preparing for an Honors Orchestra Concert. Why all the excitement? This was the first-ever offering of a Southeast Minnesota Honors Orchestra event to take place during the school year. We call it the “Excel Honors Orchestra.”

Eight different schools participated, plus a handful of private students from MacPhail Center for music in Austin, MN. In total, 78 Students from grades 6 through 8 were seen hard at work around the Music Department, practicing large ensemble music and working with instrumental coaches made up of string teachers from around southern Minnesota. At 3:00, a concert was given featuring arrangements of *The Ash Grove*, *Orpheus in the Underworld*, *Beethoven 5: Finale*, *Jupiter*, *Chorale from the Planets*, and a piece by Richard Meyer, called *G-Force*. Given the cheers and congratulations from parents and music teachers in the audience, it’s safe to say the day was a success, and made a great impact in the lives of these students and their families.

The idea for this “Honors Orchestra” has been long in coming. Indeed, the Southeast Minnesota Band Directors have had a Middle-Level Honor Band for the past 26 years. Southeast Minnesota is home to many small, rural communities. For 26 years, the Southeast Minnesota Middle-Level Honor Band has operated each year with participation from an average of 20 small school districts from all over southern Minnesota. The success of the Honor Band was a big factor in the creation of an Honors Orchestra.

Another contributing factor for us in the Southeast has been the renewed interest in participation in Solo/Ensemble festivals. Since 2021—the year when many school districts across Minnesota were in a Hybrid online/in-person schedule—Austin and Owatonna have collaborated on a combined Solo/Ensemble festival for middle school students. For these past three years

Austin (and eventually Owatonna) orchestra students, grades 6–8 have shared a Solo/Ensemble festival with the MBDA Mid-level Solo/Ensemble Festival in Owatonna Middle School. Ever since the effects of Covid have been receding, and programs have been attempting to return to activities previously held before Covid, the timing seemed right to start something new.

The idea for this Excel Honors Orchestra was a shared dream held by orchestra directors and private teachers in southeast Minnesota. In fact, the Board of Directors for the Excel Orchestra is made up of current and former string orchestra teachers, and music appreciators from the area. The Board organized over the summer of 2023 to begin discussing how the Festival would be run, what the date/timing should be, and how wide a net to cast in the surrounding area to find interest. As the school year began in September, the Board sent letters to schools all over Southern Minnesota inviting them to nominate students for a brand-new Honors Orchestra, which was set to take place in April of 2024.

One of the challenges of finding interest is the fact that small schools don’t always contain all three music offerings—band, orchestra and choir. In fact, several small rural school districts only offer one of the three. A sad fact that we must recognize is that, if a school district only offers two music choices, it is often orchestra that is left out. For example, in Mower County (bordering Albert Lea/Freeborn County on the east), there are five school districts. Of those five school districts, only Austin, MN offers 5-12 orchestra, whereas all five Mower County school districts offer band programs. That means when the Excel Orchestra Board considered how far we should send letters to schools, we had to acknowledge the fact that we would simply have fewer schools who could participate than the band program, in a similar radius.

Nevertheless, by the close of the year, we had 8 school districts interested, plus private teachers in the area who wanted to nominate students for the event. We ended up with nearly 90 nominations to work through. As a result, the Excel Orchestra Board moved forward with the plans for

our first all-day Honors Orchestra Festival.

With the help of our band colleagues, we structured our day-schedule to include three periods of large group rehearsal, one period of sectional work, a performance from a local string trio, and of course, lunchtime and snack time. The conductor for the first Excel Honors Orchestra was Mark Gitch, orchestra teacher at Wayzata High School. Students were given seating based on feedback from their directors. However, like All-State and Big 9 Music Festivals, the first 8 students in every section were given the opportunity to audition for their seats.

When the day was over, the Excel Board heard many compliments. Parents loved having the opportunity to send their students to a rigorous Honors Orchestra festival. Students loved preparing difficult repertoire and working with other string teachers (and our wonderful guest conductor) and talented students. Mark Gitch commented that the music seemed like it was at just the right level for the students, and was able to get all five of the selections up to performance standards in just three and a half hours. All in all, the day was a smashing success, and deeply impactful to everyone involved. As you may expect, the Excel Board is already making plans for the second annual Southeast Minnesota Excel Honors Orchestra.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Excel Honors Orchestra Festival will be held on April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2025, at Albert Lea High School. We hope to find more interested Southeast MN schools to join us for the day. Contact Jacob Crosby [jacob.crosby@austin.k12.mn.us](mailto:jacob.crosby@austin.k12.mn.us) for more info.

*Jacob Crosby serves on the EXCEL Orchestra Board. He graduated from the University of Northwestern-St. Paul in 2016 where he received a degree in Music Education and a degree in Music Composition. He worked for three years in Robbinsdale School District before moving to his hometown of Austin MN to teach 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Orchestra. In addition, Jacob teaches individual viola and violin lessons both privately and for MacPhail Center for Music in Austin. Jacob joins the MNSOTA Board as President-Elect in the fall of 2024. †*