



High school music: Santa Clara County programs top the charts

By Sharon Noguchi

snoguchi@mercurynews.com

Posted: 05/10/2011 11:18:34 AM PDT

Updated: 05/11/2011 03:05:27 PM PDT

It's the season of Mozart, Mendelssohn and Copland, of Carmina Burana and Gershwin. Amid the cries from schools of budgetary distress, orchestras and choirs in Santa Clara County are devoutly tuning violins and voices for concerts that celebrate spring.

Many could also be fretting the very survival of music on campus.

Despite near-fatal budget blows to school music programs, a core of high schools with established or budding reputations have not only protected music classes and ensembles but expanded them.

In districts like Palo Alto, deep roots sustain music education. But there, and elsewhere, parents volunteer countless hours and raise tens of thousands of dollars to pay for concerts, tours and competition.

The result is audible in students like Walter Hsiang, 17, a cellist at Saratoga High School.

"Music is the single most important thing in my life," said Walter, who started as an unenthusiastic student in fourth grade and now teaches music, founded a music mentoring program for elementary students and plans to minor in music at Yale next year. On any campus with a strong band or orchestra, many students say music is what brings them to school.

"We know where the hot programs are" -- and one of the places is Santa Clara County, said Paula Holcomb, director of bands at the State University of New York at Fredonia, who made a guest appearance in January to conduct the county's honor band. County schools have

Advertisement

had a stellar music reputation for at least a quarter-century, she said.

19 cents an hour

At the heart of every outstanding music program is an outstanding, talented and dedicated music teacher. Santa Clara County brims with those instructors.

On his desk at Saratoga High, Michael Boitz keeps a photo of 11 students who made up the entire string section when he began as performing arts chairman 13 years ago. The string section will grow to 145 players next year, thanks to Boitz's leadership. They're among the 460 Saratoga students involved in music -- about one-third of the school.

Boitz is one in the coterie of music teachers statewide who work 14-hour days, teaching full loads, conducting after-school groups and spending many weekends at rehearsals, performances, competitions and festivals. "It's an almost addicting feat," said Boitz, 37.

Nearby, at Lynbrook High in San Jose, music teacher John Felder said he puts in so many hours that he figures his orchestra stipend works out to 19 cents an hour.

How can he do it, fellow teachers ask. "I don't really have an answer, except it's like being chosen," said Felder, 63, who will retire next month to spend time composing and playing drums. Right now, he said, his hobby is working on Lynbrook's music program.

And it shows. Lynbrook's orchestras sound like college-level groups, Boitz said. They were invited to play in China; Saratoga's band and orchestra performed in March at Carnegie Hall.

Despite the hours and huge numbers of students they're assigned, music teachers reap immeasurable rewards, Felder said, such as "240 kids saying hello with a smile to you every morning -- that is really energizing."

Music also becomes a transformative experience for students. The band program at Santa Teresa High School in San Jose "completely changed my life," said Kendra Plemel, 18, a senior. This year she's taking three music classes and hopes to become a music teacher.

She credits Julie Bounds, who directs Santa Teresa's nine bands and has created an award-winning program. Bounds, 30, "brought life to this school," said English teacher Theresa Chaid, and gets students to buckle down in other classes in order to participate in band.

The result: "Everywhere they play somewhere public, people are just amazed that they're just high school kids," said Julie Martinez, whose two daughters have gone through Santa Teresa's music program.

Arts still required

Not the least of Bounds' accomplishments is that she's built up her program in an era of diminishing resources. She points out that by taking 60 students or more in one period, she alleviates teacher workloads.

High school music survives in part because state universities still require performing arts credits for eligibility. At Santa Teresa, besides the heat, lights and a small instrument replacement budget, the music program costs the district little extra -- compared with tens of thousands of dollars for sports.

Parents and the Santa Teresa Music and Arts Association together contribute \$90,000 annually to fund trips and competitions. Bounds chronicles her fundraising and scrounging -- including salvaging items from the school trash bin -- in her blog, thethriftybanddirector.blogspot.com.

For Palo Alto's Gunn High School choir to tour the Vatican during spring break, choir boosters provided \$42,000 in scholarships to defray the \$3,000 cost for some of the 98 students. The choir itself raises much of that money with performances during the year.

Singing in St. Peter's Basilica was "phenomenal," senior Julie Scrivner, 17, said.

Fifteen years ago, choir director Bill Liberatore felt burned out and left teaching. But within two months, he realized

his mistake. "I was miserable," he said. "I love doing music in that environment," with students who "are excited about life and having an adventure."

Of all the sights and adventures they experienced in Italy, Liberatore said the students agreed on the best part: "We got to sing."



Bill Liberatore, Choir Director of the Gunn High School Concert Choir directs the choir rehearsal for the school's Spring Concert, in the Gunn High School choir room in Palo Alto on May 6, 2011. (LiPo Ching/Mercury News) (LiPo Ching)

Contact Sharon Noguchi at 408-271-3775.

http://www.mercurynews.com/sunnyvale/ci_18027373