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**FAMILY**

## Sharing Their Music

The Richmond Symphony lends its talent and experience to young musicians in programs that allow county students to perform with professionals.

**Jim McConnell**

Chesterfield County Public Schools budget cuts left Monacan High School without an orchestra teacher three years ago, prompting veteran band teacher Jenny Ryan to take on the additional duties.

It was a significant change for Ryan, who had never taught orchestra. So when Erin Freeman, associate conductor of the Richmond Symphony, offered to come to the school occasionally and work with Monacan's orchestra students, Ryan welcomed her with open arms.

And when the local symphony reached out to Ryan last year and asked if Monacan High's orchestra would participate in its revamped Symphony@School program, Ryan was happy to oblige.

Launched in 2008 at two Richmond middle schools, Symphony@School has been expanded to include all middle and high school orchestra programs in Chesterfield, Henrico and Hanover counties as well as in the city of Richmond. The six-week program provides intensive, in-school residencies during which students' musical skills are regularly tested in workshops with Richmond Symphony Orchestra musicians.

Beginning in mid-January, Freeman held weekly group rehearsals with Monacan's 35 orchestra students. Other symphony members visited the school on a weekly basis, offering tips and holding sectional rehearsals with the teenage musicians. Composer John B. Hedges and soloist Joseph Conyers also came to Monacan prior to their mid-February concert in Richmond and spoke with orchestra students.

**A longtime mission**

"Getting to meet the players makes the music a little more human, more approachable," Ryan says. "It means a lot that [the symphony's musicians] come to the school because it shows the kids that they're willing to go out of their way to help them be successful."

Connecting with young people throughout the metro area has been one of the Richmond Symphony's primary missions since it was founded in 1957. The orchestra makes more than 200 public appearances annually. It employs 36 full-time and more than 40 part-time musicians, performs for approximately 125,000 patrons each season and serves more than 35,000 area school-aged children every year.

"For us, it's part of being a good community member," says Aimee Halbruner, the symphony's director of education and community engagement. "We want people to come downtown and hear us play, but we also want to be where the students are and be part of their communities, too."



29 Student musicians from Thomas Dale High School play with the Richmond Symphony.



Daisuke Yamamoto, Richmond Symphony concertmaster, came to Monacan High School

One of the symphony's most popular educational offerings is its Youth Orchestra Program, which provides a range of musical training for beginners to advanced students. About 270 students are currently enrolled in the program, during which they participate in weekly rehearsals, coaching sessions by Richmond Symphony musicians, chamber music performances, mentoring and other social activities.

Daisuke Yamamoto, Richmond Symphony concertmaster, came to Monacan High School in January to work with student violinists

Freeman serves as conductor of the symphony's full youth orchestra for advanced players. Musicians in this orchestra perform large, professional symphonic pieces and play a side-by-side concert with members of the Richmond Symphony.

In the Youth Concert Orchestra, which is conducted by Amy Birdsong, intermediate string, wind, brass and percussion students are taught to perform a standard symphonic repertoire.

Rebecca Jilcott, a 29-year veteran of Chesterfield County Public Schools and the orchestra teacher at Matoaca Middle School, conducts Camerata Strings, an intermediate group that develops ensemble playing and has a focus on technical skills.

Christie-Jo Adams is conductor of String Sinfonietta, an introductory string ensemble in which students learn the fundamentals of performing in an ensemble, sight reading and intonation.

"When students are surrounded and encouraged by high-level musicians, they start to rise to the occasion," Freeman says. "They can rise musically or in other areas of their lives that we never see, but it helps them realize what they can accomplish."

The symphony's Discovery Concerts are held during the school day and offer full orchestra performances that correlate to the Virginia Standards of Learning. By providing an opportunity to explore how composers and musicians use sound to create images in the minds of listeners, the concerts aim to teach students new ways to think about music.

Understanding that not all children have the ability to travel downtown and attend a performance, the Richmond Symphony occasionally takes its show on the road.

Though the Musical Ambassadors Program, five of the symphony's chamber ensembles perform more than 100 free concerts annually for children in Chesterfield, Hanover, Henrico and Richmond public schools. The performances, which typically last from 30 to 45 minutes, relate to the theme of the current Discovery Concert.

#### Envisioning a future in music

"You may think something like that isn't going to have that big an impact, but it starts them knowing and appreciating all types of music," Jilcott says. "In the area where I teach, that's not a priority for many families. I try to take all of my students to the symphony at least once because it may be the only time in their lives that they get the opportunity to do that."



Playing in the Youth Orchestra Program was literally a life-changing opportunity for one recent Clover Hill High School graduate.

The Richmond Symphony Youth Orchestra, including Chesterfield County student, practiced at Pocahontas State Park with conductor Erin Freeman

Neither of Sarah Cornett's parents play instruments. She wasn't introduced to classical music until she chose orchestra as her elective and began playing the viola as a sixth-grader at Matoaca Middle School.

She was in eighth grade when she joined the symphony as a participant in Camerata Strings and has worked her way up through the program over the past five years. In the fall, she'll begin her freshman year at the University of Michigan School of Music, the next step in her quest to become a professional symphony musician.

Cornett says that the people she's met and teachers she's had in the Youth Orchestra Program are "definitely the reason why I want to continue playing music for the rest of my life."

"Connecting with symphony musicians was great for me because I got to see what my life can be like," she adds. "I wouldn't have known on my own."

Cornett also looks forward to the opportunity to take the lessons learned from her time in the Richmond Symphony and pass them on to the next generation of young musicians.

"If you're a person who's been given the insanely amazing gift to be able to play music," she says, "everything inside you wants to share it with as many people as possible." ■

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