



*Strings students at Twin Branch Elementary School were among those to benefit from the Euclid Quartet's two-year residency in the Mishawaka schools.*

# Growing Strings

## Fischhoff and the Euclid Quartet in Mishawaka's Schools

*by Paige Risser*

Soon, we'll all start to feel the warming influence of spring, but right now the snowy February weather outside of Mishawaka High School makes sunshine and short sleeves seem a long way away. A number of the students in this 8 a.m. orchestra rehearsal look as though they'd rather be back in bed, still huddled under the covers. A cello player suppresses a yawn. Three string bass players stand in back; on the risers below are ten cellists and more than 20 violists and violinists.

Meanwhile, Jameson Cooper, violinist with the Euclid Quartet, quartet-in-residence at Indiana University South Bend, sips steaming coffee. The quartet's cellist, Si-Yan Darren Li, sits beside him on the risers, a stylish knit scarf wrapped around his neck. Violinist Jacob Murphy and violist Luis Vargas are there, too, watching as the members of the orchestra fidget, waiting for the signal to begin.

Orchestra director James Keranen raises his baton, counts out a rhythm, and the bass and the cellos launch into a moody, mysterious piece in a minor key. Bows make contact with strings, toes tap, and before long the energy from the music—"Ghosts of the Taman Negara" by Victor Lopez, about hunting for tigers in the jungles of Malaysia—breathes life into the room.

These Mishawaka string students are about to be treated to a master class with professional musicians, thanks to a collaboration among the Fischhoff National Chamber Music Competition, the Euclid Quartet, and School City of

Mishawaka. Now in its second year, this special residency program has two parts: the "Stories and Music" program, known as S.A.M.-I-Am, for primary students, which links a picture book with a live musical performance, and the master classes, which involve middle-school and high-school strings students. S.A.M.-I-Am runs in the fall and the master classes take place during the spring.

Keranen stops the student musicians after a few minutes, and wryly suggests that the quartet members might have some ideas for improvement.

Murphy gets to work.

"Violins: I think many of you are hiding in the section," he says, as he strides down the risers to the front of the room. "[This way] it'll never sound bad, but it'll never sound good. Take a risk. It's an energetic piece. Don't be afraid of the frog!"

The frog, as string musicians know, is the part of the bow near where the bow is held. Many students find it awkward to play with that part of the bow, but it produces a particularly strong and vigorous sound.

Cooper walks to the front of the room, his violin and bow in hand, to add his advice. He isolates a few notes from "Ghosts" and shows students a specific bowing technique to improve their sound.

"Use a tiny bow: up, down, up, down," he says, demonstrating the slight wrist movement for the violinists. "It's like bouncing a basketball; you do it more from the wrist, not the whole arm." He waves his arm from the floor to

the ceiling and back, illustrating his words.

After the violists and violinists practice their measures, the cellists and bass players take their turn. Li reads the sheet music over a student's shoulder as he listens, and, bobbing his head in time, seems pleased.

"I think this section actually rocks," he says.

When they hear this, even the sleepest students start to look lively.

In this second year of collaboration with the Euclid, Keranen says he feels as though the master classes have furthered his program's string instruction.

"Whether it's simply reinforcing concepts or introducing something completely new, the Euclid members are professional musicians," Keranen says, "and sometimes teenagers might listen a little closer than they would with their everyday music teacher."

Each spring, the quartet members attend two of the orchestra's rehearsals, adding their professional expertise to the students' practice by pinpointing trouble spots in the music and offering advice for improvement. This morning, the members work with the orchestra as a whole. Next week, they'll take on the students by section, giving more in-depth advice on bowings and fingerings to help the separate parts come together as an ensemble.

"Our students are not exposed regularly to musicianship of this caliber, so they look forward to it," says Keranen. "I think the students also respond well to watching Euclid work together, how they work together as a team to reach their musical goals."

## How the Partnership Began

If these high school students had any preconceptions about professional chamber musicians being old fashioned or "out of touch," the four standing before them—wearing hipster jeans and nerd-chic eyeglasses—put those notions to rest. That's part of the beauty of this program: Through it, young, professional musicians serve as role models for children and teens, showing them just how cool classical music can be.

The Fischhoff's Arts in Education Residencies began in 1995. The program sponsors residencies in Michiana schools with ensembles that participated in the Fischhoff's annual chamber music competition. The average age of Fischhoff competition participants is around 30—old enough to be at the top of their game, but still young enough to relate to student musicians.

For the 2007-08 school year, the Fischhoff worked with Mishawaka school administrators for the first time, offering the elementary schools the chance to participate in the S.A.M.-I-Am program. The interest was so great that a lottery had to be held to determine which school would host the program that year.

"We then realized there was a great demand for an educational outreach program in Mishawaka, the only district with a strings program for all elementary students," says Pam O'Rourke, who directs Fischhoff's educational programs.

Fischhoff decided to try to meet that demand through a special expanded residency program that would connect with more Mishawaka schools.

The Euclid Quartet, an alumnus of the competition, seemed like a natural partner. For the Euclid, the quartet-in-residence at Indiana University South Bend, Mishawaka is practically next door—no need for overnight accommodations or extensive travel.

"We have a treasure in town and a school corporation that was interested, so we wanted to wed those two and make connections," says Ann Divine, Fischhoff's executive director. "We thought, 'Wouldn't it be great to have a laboratory experiment of sorts, documenting whether this interaction would make a difference?'"

Funding for the initiative arrived in the form of a two-year \$100,000 Major Venture Grant from the Community Foundation of St. Joseph County's ArtsEverywhere Fund. Since Fischhoff now had the freedom to stretch out the

## Fischhoff Educators

Building on their commitment to musical education, the Fischhoff National Chamber Music Association will soon launch the Fischhoff Educator Award. This new award will recognize the work of Fischhoff Competition alumni who have developed and implemented outstanding, imaginative programming for children. It's a way of demonstrating Fischhoff's belief that chamber ensembles that can build a successful career in both music performance *and* educational outreach deserve special recognition.



"It's sort of like the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval," says Ann Divine, Fischhoff's executive director. "Shouldn't we provide a 'thank you' to those who are being innovative with education programs in their communities?"

The award includes Fischhoff's endorsement, a cash prize, and a week with Fischhoff's Arts-in-Education residency during the fall of 2011. The residency will take place at selected schools in the region, and, on a smaller scale, will parallel the 2008–2010 Mishawaka residency: a series of master classes for older students and the S.A.M.-I-Am program for the elementary grades.

The award will make winners of both the musicians and local students.

"The residencies bring outside groups in, which benefits our community," says Divine. "The ensembles incorporate humor, and make it fun. It's classical music—and we make no apologies for that—but it's fun."

program over two years, all of Mishawaka's elementary schools were able to receive the S.A.M.-I-Am program. During the first year, S.A.M.-I-Am featured Joan de Déu Prats' book *Sebastian's Roller Skates*; for 2009–10, the students read *The Bee Tree* by Patricia Polacco. Both books are connected to curricula that meet state and federal education standards.

Divine says administrators at School City of Mishawaka cut through any red tape necessary to make the partnership work.

"The Mishawaka schools have been a role model for other school corporations with their responsiveness," she says, appreciatively. "They embraced our organization before we began this, so the foundation for it had already been laid."

More than half of Mishawaka's schools qualify for Title 1 funding, which means that forty percent or more of students at those schools come from families that qualify as low-income under federal guidelines. That makes the residencies even more important, since they bring the expertise of professional musicians to an underserved population.

"These are like surgical strikes: Kids see the musicians working together, perfecting a silent model of democracy," says Divine, whose passion is exposing children to chamber music. "Everyone's equal, and each has a part to play."

