

Mark Wood Helps Students Tap Their Inner Rock Star

'Electrify Your Strings!' program teaches self-expression and technique

By Katie Robbins



The enthusiastic students of the Anything But Classical orchestra, a public high school ensemble from East Kentwood, Michigan

At most of their concerts, students in Cincinnati's Oak Hills High School symphony orchestra wear traditional concert attire—tuxedos for the boys and floor-length black dresses for the girls. But for one concert a year, their teacher and orchestra director, Maria Palassis, lets the musicians get “all made up.”

“They wear rock clothes and ripped jeans,” says Palassis with a laugh. “They get a really big kick out of it.”

The occasion is the school's annual rock-orchestra concert, when the students rock out in front of a sold-out crowd to the tunes of the Beatles, Led Zeppelin, and Cream.

The mastermind behind the concerts is Mark Wood, a classically trained violinist, who has made a name as the manufacturer of a popular line of solid-body electric violins, violas, and cellos, and as a founding member of the Trans-Siberian Orchestra. But for the last ten years, Wood has been crisscrossing the nation, visiting schools, at the elementary and secondary levels, through Electrify Your Strings! (EYS), the educational program he developed that incorporates contemporary music and electric-stringed instruments to engage and inspire young musicians.

At each stop, Wood usually spends two days (though he sometimes stays for longer residencies) introducing his electric instruments and his pedagogy, which includes a heavy emphasis on improvisation and self-expression. At the end of the session, the students, on a mix of acoustic and electric instruments, perform what amounts to a rock concert, often with lights, costumes, and even some dancing.

“There's a revolution that's happening now,” says Wood of the philosophy that guides his program. “What I find fascinating is that in last 400 years of string pedagogy, there's been little change from Paganini to Heifetz.”

The seeds of inspiration for Electrify Your Strings! came when Wood—who wears his jet-black hair below his shoulders and dons black leather pants—was studying at the Juilliard School. “I could play Stravinsky, Beethoven, Bartók with my hands tied behind my back, blindfolded, but when they took the music away, I couldn't,” Wood recalls. So he looked to rock and jazz musicians, like Frank Zappa and Miles Davis, as models. “I was hearing this innovation that had less technique, less training, but they were achieving the most important part of music making—innovation, connection,” Wood says.


Now, when Wood arrives on the first day of an EYS workshop, he begins with improvisation. He plays for the students, telling the story of what he's done that day through an impromptu piece, and then asks them what they heard—what were the colors and emotions in the music. “I say, ‘See, isn't this cool that music can



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Mark Wood with EYS students.



Even the more unconventional aspects of Wood's technique have a positive impact on students' traditional playing.



communicate in such a beautifully abstract way? Now you try it."

He then calls one of the students up to join him in a musical conversation, and the two alternate back and forth, Wood instructing the student first to simply respond to what he has played. "Then we go to the next stage," he explains. "The end of my melody is going to be your first note of your conversation with me. It makes them listen in a little more detail."

From there, Wood has the student match his tempo and then his scale, until the two are engaging in a kind of improvised duet.

"It gets scary and sweaty and nervous with the kids," Wood admits. But, he adds, "Music is a language. Kids need to learn communication. It's the most basic part of music. The beautiful part is the ability to express oneself."

And it works.

During a recent visit to Mechanicsville, Virginia, Wood performed with eighth-grade violinist Sean Simmons as part of his school's concert. "We did a little back-and-forth conversation," Simmons recalls. "He would start. He might play some riff and then I would try to copy him or maybe I would tell my own story."

"We were finishing each other's sentences."

This was Simmons' fourth experience with EYS—once he visits a school, Wood often returns year after year. "His improvisation inspired me," says

Simmons, who is writing an original piece for his summer youth-orchestra program and hopes to be a professional musician. "It makes me think more like a composer than like a violinist," he says of EYS. "Mark makes you want to spark that creative side again."

But while much of the EYS work is geared toward confidence boosting and empowering self-expression, Oak Hills' Palassis says that it's not only confidence that Wood's visits impart on students, but technique and musicality as well.

"He comes and he uses the whole of the bow," says Palassis, who had her fifth visit from EYS earlier this year. By way of example, "I say, listen to that sound he's making because he's using that bow. It's not just two inches [of bow length]."

She adds that the improvisation work has helped her students analyze the classical pieces they play. "They know how to approach it," she says. "I can see this pattern here, and here's this scale and this rhythm, and I'm going to have to work with this bowing here."

Even the more unconventional aspects of Wood's technique have a positive impact on students' traditional playing. "He uses some choreography, which in our traditional symphony music we don't do," Palassis explains. "But it gives them a sense of balance when they realize they're going to have to jump up and down. They get a sense of the instrument being a part of them. They become fearless players.

"They're stronger because of him." ■

