



MORE THAN NOTES AND SCALES

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SINI FERNANDEZ

“When students make music together, they grow together, learning about each other and what it means to be in community.”

Judy Loudenback, past Performing Arts Department Chair, asserts that making music together plays a critical part in a student’s formation. At Bear Creek, music education begins in preschool. Students meet with a music specialist through grade 6 as part of the regular school curriculum. This has built a remarkable

school culture in which “everyone just sings,” according to Loudenback. The Lower School general music classes are taught using the Orff Schulwerk methodology which combines music, speech, movement, and drama in lessons that resemble child’s play. Students learn the grammar of music and become comfortable with their singing voices, which are the musical instruments they will carry with them

Photo: Music Teacher Kelsey Jobst leads grade 5 students on the drums in a general music class lesson about rhythm.

throughout their entire lives. As they sing together, they grow in community, engage with one another, and build each other up. Loudenback reflects, "It's a lot like sports. Teams have a way of bringing out the best in each teammate when they play well together. So, too, does music when students are performing together in the classroom." The majority of time in general music class is spent gaining experience, knowledge, and skills, though the students also have an opportunity to share a small piece of all they have learned at the annual Christmas and Mothers Tea programs.

The Early Middle School music program is currently led by two amazing educators. Debra Maurer has been a member of Bear Creek's music faculty for 20 years. She absolutely loves elementary music education and knows it's what she was meant to do. After graduating from Western Washington University, she continued her education through certification courses in elementary music curriculum. She directs the grade 6 choir in addition to teaching Lower School and Preschool general music classes. Kelsey Jobst just completed her second year teaching at Bear Creek. She studied French horn and piano in college, earning a bachelor's of music in music education (so she can actually play almost every band and orchestra instrument at a middle school level). Currently, she is halfway through a master's in education program at Northwest University. Before coming to Bear Creek, she taught middle school band, elementary band, and preschool general music for four years. Kelsey teaches grades 5 and 6 general music classes and directs the grade 5, grade 6, Middle School, and jazz bands as well as Upper School sinfonia. Rounding out the Early Middle School music faculty is an orchestra director (Bear Creek will welcome a new orchestra director this fall).

Beginning with Orff's "Sing, Say, Dance, Play," our students learn to match pitch and keep rhythm. Music specialist Debra Maurer notes, "It looks like so much fun, they're just playing...and we are, but we are teaching real musical concepts." She continues, "There's nothing better than walking into a room and seeing 19 kids all doing something different but

making beautiful music. That's community. They are part of a community, and each part is important as a contribution to the whole, not just individually."

The current school of thought regarding teaching music is not unlike the way we learn to read. For example, a child never reads the word "cat" without knowing what a cat is. The same applies to music. Students are not taught what a quarter note or an eighth note are until they have experienced them hundreds of times. They experience what it feels like to modulate up to change keys or use syncopation before they know the theory behind those musical concepts. So, the goal of the general music classes is to expose the students to *lots* of music, including traditional, folk, classical, and jazz. Kodály is another popular music education methodology that Jobst incorporates into her Early Middle School general music lessons. The Kodály method draws its materials from authentic folk music, spirituals, and good-quality composed music.

All students are required to play a band or orchestra instrument in grade 5, having finally grown big enough to play band instruments which don't come in multiple sizes like stringed instruments. This ensures all students start at the beginning and have the opportunity to build their music proficiency together as they continue playing and performing each year. If a student has taken instrumental music lessons as a younger child, then he or she is encouraged to pick up new instrument.

In previous years, Bear Creek students could choose between band and music appreciation, but two years ago the curriculum was revised to include both band and orchestra in grade 5 and eliminate music appreciation. Loudenback recalls, "We realized that the most worthwhile music education at that age is to learn an instrument. Learning an instrument is highly valuable because it teaches students to read music (a different language), listen, keep time, stay with the group, and follow the instructions on the page while watching a conductor. There are so many things going on simultaneously. It stretches all those synapses and is one of the best ways to get kids to think non-

linearly. Music students respond to what they are hearing while they are doing something (i.e. playing their instruments), reading music, and getting feedback from their director. Plus, there is the physical aspect. They have to learn to make all those notes using the proper fingering and/or embouchure [mouth shape]. It's multitasking in the best way."

Grades 5 and 6 bands and orchestras are performance ensembles and, in many ways, are the practical application of all the music grammar learned in general music class. True to form however, Bear Creek students are intentionally prepared for their ensemble experience. In grades 3 and 4, they learn to play the recorder. Maurer remarks, "Recorder is a great introductory instrument for playing in an ensemble. It's a tool we use to teach how to be an ensemble member: get along, know your part, listen to your neighbors, wait your turn. Recorder also teaches valuable skills that will transfer for those who go on to play a wind instrument. Plus of course, students learn to read and understand notation, and practice correct breathing and posture."

Grade 5 band is limited to four instruments: flute, clarinet, trumpet, and trombone. To ensure that all students learn to read music notation, only those with a background in piano may choose percussion. Grade 5 orchestra students may play violin, viola,

cello, or bass. The list of allowed band instruments is restricted to a small set of popular instruments because they are more widely available and less expensive to rent. "Also, there is strength in numbers," Jobst says. "I don't want sections of just one (e.g. one bassoon or one tuba) because those students won't have anyone else to rely on as they try to recall the correct notes, playing

posture, etc. It's a big job to learn to translate black and white spots and lines into rhythm, fingering pattern, and embouchure!"

There is no expectation for ensemble students to take private lessons on their instruments, although lessons are not discouraged. Of course the most important predictor of success is practice. Loudenback notes,



Music Teacher Deb Mauer leads Grade 6 choir



Grade 6 band

“When kids practice at home, they will self-select to stay in band or orchestra because they will find success at it.” Jobst adds, “We want kids to stick with an instrument long enough to make it count.”

In grade 6, the ensemble curriculum is expanded to include choir as well as band and orchestra. Maurer notes, “Grade 6 choir builds on the singing skills learned in general music, but

we concentrate much more on choral technique including vowel placement, resonance, balance and blend between sections, and expression. The repertoire is challenging with more difficult part-singing and a wider range of notes. At this age, their ability to sing in a higher and lower range is expanding.” She emphasizes that each student is not just a voice but an integral part of the ensemble,

and the feeling of belonging makes for a very closely bonded group. Grade 6 band students can choose to continue on the same instruments they played in grade 5, or they may switch to more obscure instruments. In grade 6 band, you might find oboes, saxophones, bassoons, French horns, baritones, or tubas. By the end of the year, students are able to play 6-8 notes on their instruments and perform ensemble music with distinct parts.

The Early Middle School ensembles give two concerts each year in January and May, and the grade 6 groups also perform for adjudication at the ACSI Elementary Musicale in March. Last spring some students also independently formed small (two to five members) ensembles and performed for adjudication at the Lake Washington School District’s Middle School Solo and Ensemble Festival.

Loudenback concludes, “I think beauty draws people to Christ.” The Early Middle School music program intentionally puts students together in community to create something beautiful. The program draws students together as a community of believers as they explore their gifts and talents and the beauty that is music, while preparing them to be a part of the Middle School and Upper School performing arts program where they can continue to learn and polish their skills as part of exciting performance ensembles.



Grade 5 band



Grade 5 orchestra