

9-1-2009

# Two Part Harmony: Beginner Music Students Learn the Strings as Undergrads Make Teaching Debut

Amy Oprean  
*Wayne State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/newscience>

---

### Recommended Citation

Oprean, Amy (2009) "Two Part Harmony: Beginner Music Students Learn the Strings as Undergrads Make Teaching Debut," *New Science*: Vol. 17: Iss. 1, Article 5.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/newscience/vol17/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@WayneState. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Science by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@WayneState.

# Two Part Harmony:

Beginner music students learn the strings as undergrads make teaching debut

by Amy Oprean

Ever since she was 12 years old, Dr. Laura Roelofs, assistant professor of music in Wayne State University's College of Fine, Performing and Communication Arts, knew she wanted to be a performer, but it took a few more years to discover she also wanted to teach. "I planned right away on playing the violin professionally, but I realized within a few years that performing and teaching go hand in hand, and that you learn even more from teaching someone else than you do by practicing."

Roelofs hopes some of Wayne State University's music students will experience a similar moment of discovery during their time as teachers in the String Project @ Wayne, an intensive teacher-training program that began its first semester in September 2008. The program offers three levels of lessons for the violin, viola, cello and bass for Detroit-area children grades three to five, taught by WSU music performance or music education undergraduate students under the supervision of a master teacher. Classes are small – no more than 10 students to a teacher – and range from \$4 to \$5 per session, depending on the class. For 2008-09, the project is

funded by WSU's President's Research Enhancement Program and the NAMM Foundation through the National String Project Consortium. The String Project @ Wayne has also formed a collaborative partnership with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra; the project classes serve as the foundation level of the DSO's Power of Dreams Program, a project that provides children with little to no access to string education the opportunity to participate in string classes.

There are more than 30 string projects nationwide, all of which have the overarching goal of increasing the number of well-qualified string teachers in the country while providing exemplary string education to children in underserved areas. The Wayne State program stands out as one of very few string projects located in large urban centers. Roelofs sees the String Project @ Wayne as an opportunity to expand Detroit's arts and culture community. "I see it as a way to bring all of the disparate constituencies in the area together around educating kids on strings," she said.

Although the string project concept has been

W

"They're old enough to have the attention span to grasp the concepts and pay attention for the hour-and-a-half classes, and they're still so open."

— Dr. Laura Roelofs

around for decades, only a single research paper has been published assessing the impact that such programs have on the college-age interns and the elementary music students they teach. Roelofs believes Wayne State's program is an ideal place to conduct additional studies, and will begin implementing her research in the program's second semester.

One of the major questions Roelofs wants to answer is the extent to which string project participation can inspire music undergraduates to pursue careers in teaching. For decades in the U.S., more string teachers have retired than have entered the field, a trend that has resulted in what the National Association for Music Education estimated in 2005 to be about 5,000 unfilled job vacancies



Dr. Laura Roelofs, assistant professor of music

per year. While this can be traced back to serious string students preferring to perform rather than teach, and even to a subtle cultural stigma attached to string teaching, Roelofs attributes the disparity at least partly to simple lack of teaching exposure.

“Once you get it the first time, it becomes almost addictive; that ‘a-ha’ moment when the kids are picking it up, it’s working, and you can see that you’re having a real life-changing impact on other people,” she said. “That’s one of the big things that I want to do with this program – connect strong performance skills with a love of teaching to show how rewarding it is.” Advising the interns throughout the process is inaugural master teacher William Starnes, the same string instructor who inspired Roelofs in her youth to become a teacher. Since beginning his career as a professional violinist at age 14, Starnes has been a member of the El Paso Symphony Orchestra, the San Antonio Symphony Orchestra, the United States Air Force Strings in Washington, D.C, the Pittsburgh Opera, the Pittsburgh Ballet and the Pittsburgh Civic Light Opera. He’s taught as an adjunct professor at Catholic University, American University, and the Academy of Musical Arts in the Washington, D.C. area and served as assistant director for music and instruction at the D.C. Youth Orchestra Program for more than 20 years. Roelofs hopes Starnes’ extensive experience and unparalleled enthusiasm for orchestra teaching will help the interns stay focused as they take on many new responsibilities, including lesson planning, communicating with



## Two Part Harmony continued

W

“My hope is that they’re going to have a lot of self-esteem when they finish from realizing they have done something that’s hard and have done it well.”

— Dr. Laura Roelofs

to have the attention span to grasp the concepts and pay attention for the hour-and-a-half classes, and they’re still so open. Not everyone will stick to it, but it’s amazing how many of the kids were extremely excited at the recruitment concerts, and really attached themselves to one instrument or another.”

Students began classes in September, meeting twice a week to learn the fundamental physical skills of string teaching as well as elementary music theory and ear-training. Once a month, the small classes are combined into one large ensemble; the young students’ first orchestra experiences. Through the Detroit Symphony Orchestra partnership, children hear special “Inspiration Day” performances featuring DSO musicians. For regular exposure to a working ensemble, they also have the opportunities to see their teachers perform together, setting the tone for the interns as role models that are part of a music community with the students.

The combination of curriculum and the communal environment is important to Roelofs, who believes it will encourage the young students to stay engaged and reach their potential, even as they discover the hard work and dedication needed for learning a musical instrument. “I would like them to get an idea that they can do more than they ever thought they could, especially because very high standards will be set for them as young music students, in terms of their attendance, their preparedness and doing things the right way from the beginning,” she said. “My hope is that they’re

going to have a lot of self-esteem when they finish from realizing they have done something that’s hard and have done it well.”

**About Dr. Laura Roelofs:** Dr. Roelofs received an Mus. B. from Boston University’s School of Fine Arts and an M.M. and D.M.A. from the Catholic University of America in violin performance. She performed for fourteen seasons as assistant concertmaster of the Richmond Symphony Orchestra, and as a member of the Oberon String Quartet, artists-in-residence at St. Catherine’s and St. Christopher’s Schools in Richmond. She has appeared as a soloist with a number of orchestras including the Baltimore Symphony and the Richmond Symphony. She is assistant concertmaster of the Michigan Opera Theatre and assistant professor of violin and viola at Wayne State University. She joined WSU in 2004.

parents and school administrators and recruiting new students. “He is the role model that I want for them,” she said. “As he says, music is caught, not taught, and so that’s what I want to convey. Your own passion about the music and your passion about doing it exactly right is what will get them.”

Another research topic Roelofs is interested in investigating is how many of the program’s students will continue taking instrument lessons past their first year. Recruited largely through concerts at local elementary schools, the program’s inaugural class of 93 is full of enthusiastic beginners whose retention will be tracked. “We’re targeting third to fifth graders because it’s the perfect time to catch their interest,” she said. “They’re old enough

