

It Takes Work, and Pluck Camerata New England Brings Strings Program to Lebanon

By Katie Beth Ryan
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Last Monday, Chehalis Jones had a decision to make. Should she go to her basketball game, which fell right in the midst of her Lebanon Strings Program cello lesson? Or should she stick around to learn about notes from instructor Linda Galvan, and pluck *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star* on her instrument?

"You have to choose," Ma'Ko'Quah Jones told her daughter, a third-grader at Mount Lebanon School. "Do you want to go to the game, or do you want to go to your lesson?"

Chehalis pondered this for a moment. When her answer came, it was firm. "I need to go to my lesson," she said.

The dozen students who are part of the first Lebanon String Program cello class have set aside Monday afternoons to learn to read music and study this instrument. By and large, the students are here because they want to be.

"It seemed like really fun," said Claire Thibodeau, 7, of West Lebanon.

But learning the cello is by no means a walk in the park. "Sometimes it can be kind of hard," Thibodeau said. Her classmate Hannah Read agreed, but said that Galvan "taught us a rhyme for the strings," about ants digging in the dirt in the ground, all the way to China (the A-D-G-C series of chords).

The students receive a bargain. For no cost, other than their time, they receive use of a cello, bow, rosin and carrying case, and instruction from Galvan, the principal cellist in Camerata New England, which funds the Lebanon Strings Program.

The idea of starting a strings program in Lebanon schools originated in the summer of 2010, after Lisa Vallejo-Sorensen, the parent of a Mount Lebanon School student, suggested that Mount Lebanon music teacher Christine Greenough get in touch with Camerata, which had given concerts and demonstrations at schools in the North Country.

Greenough envisioned the classical music group doing something similar at Mount Lebanon. "But they wanted to do something bigger and more lasting," Greenough said. Specifically, Camerata

was interested in beginning a strings program in a school system that had none. Beginning in fifth grade, Lebanon students have the opportunity to begin playing band instruments, but to this point there hasn't been a strings program.

Over the next year, Camerata sought funding that would get the strings program off the ground. Lebanon philanthropists Whit and Closey Dickey provided the roughly \$16,000 needed to purchase cellos for the first group of students. At the moment, cellos are the only instrument taught, but Camerata would like to expand to include violin and viola, said Carlos Galvan, chairman of Camerata's board and husband to Linda.

"We thought rather than putting it off and raising more money to get the whole program kicked off across the spectrum, that it needed to start," he said.

For the first class, 40 students at Mount Lebanon, Hanover Street and Seminary Hill Schools in grades two through six applied for 12 slots. Each had to explain their reasons for wanting to play the cello, and demonstrate that they had the discipline to attend class and practice for at least a half hour every day.

"The kids that have been chosen are just really good for the program. They're interested. They really want it," said Linda Galvan. "It's not as though a parent said, 'We're going to sign you up.' They had to actually show and express why they wanted to be part of this." Applicants weren't screened for financial need, but private lessons and instrument rentals and purchases can be costly. "That was part of the mission of the string program," Greenough said, "to be able to provide instrument lessons" to children who were interested.

The weekly classes began last month, and as of last Monday, the students were still learning how to hold a bow (using Magic Markers as stand-ins) and how to read notes. They're still learning the proper methods of storing and carrying their instruments.

"How do we carry it?" Emily Wright, a Mount Lebanon third-grade teacher who assists at the lessons, asked student Isabel



At right, Emily Wright of Enfield, a teaching assistant, shows Claire Thibodeau, 7, how to tune her strings using a digital tuner. Also preparing their cellos at the Mount Lebanon School are Isabel Agbogbo, 9, left, and Chehalis Jones, 8. (Valley News — Theophil Syslo)

Agbogbo, who had only one hand on the cello's neck. Wright reminded her that one hand should also be placed on the body of the instrument.

After only a few classes, they could now pluck *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* with their fellow musicians. When Galvan drew some notes on a white board, most of the students could tell a G note apart from an E and an A.

"Could you pluck a G for me?" Galvan asked. "How about D?" The plucks didn't come all at once, but when they did, each sounded roughly the same.

Another goal is to have string students join Camerata in a future concert at the Lebanon Opera House -- "something at their level," Linda Galvan said, "but we want to acknowledge the role of children in musical life and performance." The ultimate goal, she said, is to develop a new generation of people who can both perform, and appreciate, classical music.

"We need to build audiences for the future and give the kids a chance to recognize the joy of the experience of making music," Galvan said. "I just want it to spread and get bigger, and be able to involve more kids."