

The new world of symphony

FACE school's full-scale orchestra offers riches beyond measure to its young players

by Monique Polak - The Montreal Gazette ©

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It's called the FACE Symphony Orchestra, but it isn't only for FACE students. In fact, only a dozen of the 65 students in the orchestra attend the Fine Arts Core Education public school. The rest of the musicians are local high school, CEGEP and university students, some from as far away as Joliette, who come to FACE to attend Tuesday evening orchestra practice.

And it's an opportunity they wouldn't miss. Not only are these young people gaining valuable musical experience, they're benefiting from the chance to play with other gifted musicians.

"The biggest joy for these kids is that they're all at about the same level. They respect each other's musical talent and so they motivate each other," said Theodora Stathopoulos, the orchestra's founder and conductor.

Stathopoulos, who's been teaching music at FACE since 1992, began the orchestra last fall. She says she couldn't have done it without the support of her fellow music teachers and FACE administrators.

Though the school is known for its bands, choirs, string orchestras and wind ensemble, Stathopoulos believed the time was right for a symphony orchestra - something that she acknowledges is a rarity in high schools.

"In a symphony orchestra, there are generally two of each of the wind instruments. The wind players have to be of high calibre because they're all soloists," she explained.

Since all FACE students take vocal music, in past years the school had to engage a small orchestra for the performance of such elaborate choral works as Karl Orff's *Carmina Burana*. Now that the symphony orchestra exists, it's no longer necessary to hire outside musicians.

But the orchestra does far more than save the school money "It enriches our instrumentalists and provides a model of excellence to our students," Stathopoulos said. Nick Primiano, the principal of FACE, pointed out that the orchestra successfully brings together current and former FACE students as well as other local musicians. "We wanted to provide an integrated continuum," Primiano said.

Grade 9 FACE student Aaron Hancox, 14, is one of the orchestra's auxiliary percussionists. He jumped at the opportunity to join the group. "I thought it was cool. It gives me a chance to play harder music than I do in my instrumental music class," Hancox said.

Hancox also credits fellow orchestra member John Conn, a McGill University percussion major, with helping him improve his skills. "Before, I just kind of winged percussion. John's taught me a lot of technical stuff," he said.

The orchestra has also led to the creation of an informal artist-in-residence program. If they choose to, principal players can work as tutors for other FACE students.

"This gives our strong students something that money can't buy: experience," Stathopoulos said. "Three years teaching at a fine-arts school is a great addition on a resumé."