

STRING FAMILY PLAYERS

All Strings Considered

Art Form: Music

Style: Various/Baroque to Contemporary

Culture: Western European

MEET THE ARTIST:

David Young, leader and narrator of the **String Family Players** quintet, also plays double bass in the group. Educated at the Eastman School of Music and the University of California, David holds the position of Principal Bass for the Los Angeles Opera and performs in various recording and chamber music ensembles in the Southern California area. In addition, he teaches at the Colburn School of Performing Arts in Los Angeles and at California State University, Long Beach. Mr. Young is the Artistic Director of the String Family Players Association, a non-profit corporation that also sponsors the group to conduct in-school residencies.

The other professional musicians who make up the String Family Players use their masterful performance skills to share music with children as well as adults. They include *Nancy Roth*, violin, *Armen Anassian*, violin, *Lynn Grants*, viola, and *Maurice Grants*, cello. The collective group combines their joy for classical music with their deep love for children.

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

The *String Family Players* quintet introduces audiences to some of the modern orchestral instruments in a most delightful way. Their performance of "All Strings Considered" begins by introducing the audience to the names, respective sounds and ranges of the violin, viola, cello and double bass. The musicians then introduce themselves and demonstrate their favorite characteristics of the instruments they play. Their diverse repertoire includes selections written several centuries ago as well as compositions from modern times. Students will hear the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, as well as the theme music from "The Simpsons," written by Danny Elfman. Students are involved in the performance as they join in games that help them discriminate between the unique sounds of each instrument. By the finale, listeners have a heightened perception that enables them to hear music in an entirely new way.



PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

The history of stringed instruments is an ancient one -- the earliest types were designed to be plucked or strummed. Besides the guitar or harp, other plucked or strummed instruments include the psaltery, zither, lyre and the lute. Stringed instruments weren't known in Europe until the Medieval Ages; it was in the 15th century when the family of violins developed. These were the first stringed instruments that were played with bows.

The design of the instruments evolved as the bow developed. The bow is a curved wooden stick with horsetail hair stretched from end to end. The design of the bridge, over which the strings are strung, changed from straight to curved, allowing the bow to slide over one string at a time.

The instruments of the modern violin family were mostly developed in Italy and therefore have Italian names. Early bowed instruments include the rebec, lyra da braccio, and the family of instruments called the viola da gamba. The modern violin shape began to solidify in the late 1400s. Any instrument with strings was referred to as some sort of "viol," and the full name of the earliest violin, which was held on the arm, was "viola da braccio." The "viola da gamba" was held with the legs.

Other instruments of the string family also have colorful histories and a wide variety of musical styles. One way of distinguishing between the styles is to determine whether the player is reading written music or improvising. For example, classical styles are mainly written and jazz styles are mainly improvised.

Small stringed instruments made to be bowed are often classified under the heading of "fiddles" and folk fiddling has a long tradition in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. In America, however, the violin has been used for "fiddling" as well as in the symphony orchestra.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- How many strings does each of these instruments have: violin, viola, cello, double bass?
- Where do the fingers press on the strings of the instruments to make higher or lower sounds? Can you guess why this happens?
- What is the technique for making the tone waver? What is the term used to describe this? (vibrato)
- Which instrument can play the highest tones? Lowest? Why do you think this is so?
- Aside from the fact that the cello can play lower than the violin, describe the other differences. (violin can play at a faster tempo, usually gets the melody; cello plays at a slower tempo, has a fuller sound and usually accompanies the violin)
- Bass strings are longer than violin strings; how else are they different? (bass strings are thicker)
- When you play pizzicato you pluck the string. Which instrument's pizzicato sound vibrates the longest, the violin or the bass? (the bass)

FRAMEWORK FOCUS - SCIENCE:

Vibration is movement, not sound. You can see vibrations in water when you throw a stone into it and feel vibrations during an earthquake. Vibration is also the basis of **sound** -- the sensation caused in the ear by the movement of air. The science of sound is called **acoustics**. Vibration disturbs the atmosphere; waves of disturbance travel through the air at the speed of sound, which is 1,113 feet per second. On earth, vibrations moving at the rate of between 20 and 10,000 times per second can be heard by the human ear.

You can hear vibrations when you stretch a string tightly between two points and pluck the string. Take a slender board and hammer pairs of nails opposite each other into both ends. Make sure that they are different distances apart. Stretch rubber bands, fishing line or wire tightly between the partner nails. Pluck the strings and see if you can get different tones from ones that are stretched between nails of different distances apart. Which sounds are higher? Lower? See what else you can create with strings tightly stretched over a board or other material such as a cardboard or tin box.

Legend:

- 🎨 Artistic perception
- ❖ Creative expression
- ▶ Historical & cultural context
- ⇒ Aesthetic valuing
- * Connections, Relations, Applications

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- 🎧 Listen to recordings such as classic violin performances by Yehudi Menuhin and Jascha Heifetz. Compare violin solos to those of cellists such as Rostropovitch and Yo Yo Ma. Great recordings by violinists such as William Primrose and Pinkas Zukerman, and by double bassist Edgar Meyer are easily available.
- ❖ Choose lively music with a strong beat for the students to clap to. "Russian Sailors Dance" by Gliere has many variations with changes of mood that are a fun challenge to adjust one's clapping to. Marches such as from the "Royal Fireworks Music" by Handel make for great marches around the room. Clap with the beat and then try clapping between the beat, or on the "off-beat."
- ⇒ Instruments other than the violin are also featured in different styles of music. The double bass is at the heart of the improvising jazz tradition. Listen to a recording by Ray Brown, one of the pivotal double bass players in jazz. Most of what he plays is not written down, but is improvised upon a song or melody structure. After listening to his playing, discuss and comment on what you notice from your new knowledge.

- ▶ There are many folk fiddle traditions throughout the world. In the United States, the fiddling tradition was established in places like Appalachia. These folk tunes are played on the same violin as the pieces played in a symphony orchestra. Listen to fiddling from traditional recordings as well as successful artists of today such as Mark O'Connor, Liz Carroll, and Natalie McMaster. How would you describe the mood, tempo, style, and texture of sounds created by these fiddle masters? Listen again and imagine miming the strokes as the music is played.



SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

The Diagram Group. *Musical Instruments of the World*. Facts on File Publications, New York, NY: 1976.

Wood, Robert W. *Sound Fundamentals*. Chelsea House Publishers, Philadelphia: 1997.