

A Final Report to the City of Urbana Arts Grant Program
Exploring America's Golden Age of String Music and Baseball 1900-1920
2010 American String Festival

The Sousa Archives and Center for American Music supports and facilitates research, education, and public engagement throughout Central Illinois and the broader Urbana-Champaign community. The Center's programming over the past seven years has been built on creating and sustaining collaborative relationships with public schools, cultural institutions and business organizations. These have included the King Elementary, Urbana Middle and Urbana High Schools, Franklin Middle School, Krannert Center, Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois Alumni Association, Champaign Park District, Urbana Park District, Urbana Business Association, City of Urbana, 40 North|88 West, Virginia Theatre, Community Center for the Arts, Urbana-Champaign Independent Media Center, Library of Congress, Smithsonian Institution, and U.S. Marine Band Library and Museum.

Each November the Center produces a series of concerts, performance lectures and exhibitions associated with American Music Month to engage actively members of our community with America's music, history, and culture. The string workshop that is part of each year's music programming is devoted exclusively to hands-on music instruction for underserved public and home school students from our local and regional communities. This workshop provides students and teachers with opportunities to explore different social and cultural expressions through music, performance, and discussions of history and science.

This past year the two-day string workshop was held at the Urbana-Champaign Independent Media Center on November 18-19, 2010. Funding and administrative support was provided through an Urbana Arts Grant, the Sousa Archives and Center for American Music and the Community Center for the Arts. The 2010 String Festival curriculum kit—consisting of learning goals, music, historical essays, and instructional exercises—was completed in early August and mailed later that month to fifty public school and private string teachers from across Central Illinois. These included two elementary schools (Barkstall and Kenwood Elementary), four middle schools (Urbana, Franklin, Jefferson, and Edison), five high schools (Urbana, Vernon Hills, Bloomington, University, and Normal Community West) and two school districts (Kankakee and Western Springs), and the Illinois State Lab Schools. In addition, eight private music teachers from Charleston, Chicago, Hudson, Normal, and Champaign were invited to have their students participate in this year's string program.

This year's workshop provided hands-on master class instruction, teacher-lead discussions, group performances, and lectures on music acoustics and the history of music and baseball in America.¹ The

¹ Alan Nathan, a leading baseball scholar and presenter on the physics of baseball from the University of Illinois, was the original guest speaker planned for the workshop, but he was called to testify for the Baseball Commission which required him to cancel his presentation. Instead, Steve Errede came the first day of the workshop to talk about the physics of sound, but because he was not available for the second day of the workshop, Scott Schwartz, Archivist for Music and Fine Arts, gave a presentation on the early history of American-style baseball.

workshop was taught to ninety students from Urbana Middle School, Urbana High School, and Countryside Elementary School, and four home-school students from Urbana-Champaign.² The workshop's teachers included Robin Kearton (violin), Tom Faux (banjo/guitar), Jan Matthews (violin), Matt Croisant (guitar), Amy Flores (cello), Maria Del Toro (viola), and Chris Reyman (accordion). Tina Hope served as an administrator. In addition, Steve Errede lectured on music acoustics, and Scott Schwartz lectured on the history of music and baseball.

Both are faculty members at the University of Illinois.

Each day's workshop began with simple warm-up exercises that focused on bowing and finger techniques. These were followed with a review of basic harmonic theory, which allowed the students to improvise over a sixteen-bar blues progression. Once these hands-on exercises were finished, the instructors, Tom Faux and Robin Kearton, talked about the history of "Santa Anna's Retreat" and then taught the students to play this tune's asymmetrical melody and harmonic progression. After a brief break, the students were taught to play "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," and then Scott Schwartz and Robin Kearton briefly discussed the history behind this baseball song. This activity was followed by a thirty-minute dance lesson taught by Tom Faux in which students learned to waltz to a simple melody. After lunch the students were given time to work on their new performance techniques using the two new songs that they had learned earlier in the morning. Next, on the first day of the workshop, Steve Errede lectured on the physics of sound, and on the second day, Scott Schwartz talked about the early history of music and baseball.

At the conclusion of each day's workshop, the students and their public school teachers were



Figure 1. Robin Kearton improvising with the students.



Figure 2. Maria Del Toro assisting with the instruction of "Santa Anna's Retreat."

² The elementary and middle school students had an average of one to four years of experience playing their string instruments and the high school students had five to six years. There were also three middle and two high school students who participated in this workshop who had over seven years of string instruction.



Figure 3. Jan Matthews demonstrating bow technique.



Figure 4. Amy Flores working with cello students.



Figure 5. Chris Reyman and Tom Faux teaching improvisation.



Figure 6. Steve Errede talking about the physics of sound.



Figure 7. Cello and bass students working on “Santa Anna’s Retreat” chord progression.



Figure 8. Tom Faux teaching Angela Englishharden and students to waltz.

given the opportunity to complete a brief survey identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the workshop. When the students were asked to describe what they enjoyed most, one individual wrote, “to listen and to learn about fun music, and [not worry about making] mistakes while playing.” Another wrote, “This is cool. I love it. I liked how we learned all those songs mainly by ear.” In addition, one of the public school teachers provided some helpful suggestions for improving the workshop, including more use of small-group instruction with different instructors throughout the day.

Urbana Arts Grant funds also supported a special instrumental program at King Elementary School by workshop leaders Robin Kearton, Tom Faux, and Scott Schwartz, along with students who participated in the November workshop. On February 9, 2011, Robin, Tom, Scott, and the students presented to forty-five students in the fourth and fifth grade classrooms of Matthew Mockbee and Sally Thompson. The purpose of this additional presentation was to have the workshop students teach what they had learned in the fall within the context of United States history, by actively engaging with the elementary student musicians and workshop teachers. The session was so well-received that Scott Schwartz was invited back to King Elementary School to give a second lecture-performance with another colleague, Marten Stromberg, on the music and biography of Carl Sandburg and Woody Guthrie. Sally Thompson wrote in response to both presentations:

I thought both the baseball performance, as well as the Sandburg/Guthrie performance, were excellent!! Teaching the students about history through the use of music is a wonderful way to get the students excited about specific people and themes from different time periods. I believe your style of delivery was so engaging and entertaining that the students will retain this information much more than if they just heard a teacher/speaker presenting information on these themes. I was really struck by the fact that your program could be entertaining for many ages....both has a way of encouraging the students to participate and ask questions! I really would love to work with you again on several different topics that I could see would be helpful for fifth grade students. (April 4, 2011)

While it is difficult to measure accurately the impact of this November's workshop on the cognitive abilities of the students who participated, all of them had a positive learning experience and acquired new performance skills, which have improved their abilities to make music—both in their school orchestras as well as in extra-curricular ensembles. This outcome alone demonstrates the importance of continuing this special workshop in the coming years, but unlike past year's string festivals, where enrollment has typically included over two hundred students, this year's participation was significantly lower than expected. Many of the public and private school music teachers who had participated in previous year's workshops were unable to get permission from their school districts to participate because of financial constraints. Given the State of Illinois' current economic situation, it was assumed that participation would be slightly lower than in the past because of funding limitations, but the significant decrease in number of participants this year was unexpected.

After a careful re-evaluation of the string festival's mission and learning goals, and in consultation with the workshop's lead instructors, Robin Kearton and Tom Faux, the Sousa Archives and Center for American Music has determined that the format of the string festival is no longer practical for area schools. The established model of bringing students to a central location to conduct a day-long program is no longer sustainable for school districts that are unable to afford transportation costs for sending students to Urbana-Champaign. In addition, the range of music skill levels across the middle and high school students who have participated in previous years' festival have made it difficult to focus

effectively on specific skill sets for particular groups of students without teaching either above or below some students' technical abilities. This is not an uncommon circumstance for some instruction in our public schools, but such situations have tended to limit students' educational and musical experiences.

Based on the recent experiences with the students and teachers of King Elementary School, it is the Center's belief that the mission and focus of the string festival should be modified to make better use of our community's music resources (i.e., music teachers, performers, historians, archivists, and historical collections) to integrate music performance and culture into the daily educational curriculums (i.e., science, math, history, and literature) that are taught in our local elementary schools. While this change radically alters the original premise of the string festival, it is evident that there is a strong desire to use music and the arts to reinforce students' regular classroom learning experiences.

Given some of the King Elementary School teachers' interest in the use of music performance to reinforce their students' learning experiences in the coming year, the Center for American Music, working collaboratively with Sally Thompson and Matthew Mockbee, will develop and produce four educational engagement programs that focus on significant topical themes associated with America's history (i.e., Colonial Politics and Economies, Westward Expansion, Invention and Industrialization, and War and Peace). Each thematic program will incorporate entertaining performances of music, poetry, art, dance, and theatre into the classroom instruction of history, science and math, and encourage students to ask questions and discuss issues raised during each special program. In addition the students will be encouraged to do extracurricular readings and performance projects to complement their classroom studies. Depending on the nature of the students' performance projects they may have the opportunity to perform publicly their projects for their peers and parents as part of the University's annual American Music Month celebration and related Boneyard Arts Festival activities. If this pilot project gains additional support from the students and teachers of King Elementary School, then the Center would seek to engage the fourth and fifth grade students and teachers of Leal Elementary School and other elementary schools in Urbana in a similar series of programs the following school year as interest arises.