

teaching

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Rocking Out with the **LAKESWOOD PROJECT**

*A high school program in Ohio
challenges students and changes lives.*



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"My students were very interested in learning more about rock and roll, even though they played classical instruments." —Beth Hankins



ROCKING OUT

In 2002, Beth Hankins formed a groundbreaking high school ensemble that excels, challenges, changes lives—and rocks. **BY STEPHEN HOLLEY**

IN DECEMBER OF 2001, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame collaborated on a series of workshops that explored the connections between classical music and other styles. Beth Hankins, orchestra director at Lakewood High School in Lakewood, Ohio, attended the sessions and came away with a bold idea—to create the world’s first high school rock and roll orchestra. Hankins remembers, “I talked to my students and colleagues and dreamed up the idea of developing an ensemble to feature strings that was supported by a rock band. The Lakewood Project was formed as a response to my students’ desire to play ‘their music’ on the instruments they love.”

The Lakewood Project is a self-conducted ensemble comprised of two electric string quartets, a ten-piece acoustic

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with THE LAKEWOOD PROJECT

string orchestra, and a full rock rhythm section—over 40 musicians in all. When needed, the group also incorporates vocalists. The members of this unique ensemble compose, arrange, and improvise in a variety of musical genres including classical, rock, jazz, funk, pop, metal, disco, and progressive, among others. With Lakewood’s orchestral program comprised of five orchestras and three string quartets, Hankins felt that an “outside the box” ensemble would be a fitting addition to their already strong program.

From a pedagogical standpoint, Hankins realized that she could teach proper string instrument technique while, at the same time, making use of a variety of styles of music both beyond and including classical music. “My students were very interested in learning more about rock and roll, even though

they played classical instruments.” The driving idea was to explore classical music with a twist: How would Mozart sound today if he were alive and had access to current technology and the insight of other genres?

To that end, students are often tasked with creating arrangements for the ensemble. This is a group effort, as all students in the program work in teams to choose the music they orchestrate, rehearse, and perform. At times, the students consult a piano score to help them clarify an odd chord, but more often than not, they attempt to transcribe the pieces they learn by ear. Introducing the students to arranging and transcribing is not only an indispensable musical skill, but it also helps to convey ownership of the ensemble to the students by highlighting and including



“their” music. From there, students make decisions on voicings, solos, and often help rehearse the ensemble. “I also learned that in order for the classical musicians to play with the rock musicians, we would have to learn and converse” in a different way. Therein lies the heart of the mission of the Lakewood Project—to expand the musical horizons of its student musicians.

The ensemble rehearses once a week for four hours, plus a one-hour sectional. Often, Hankins utilizes Lakewood Project alumni to mentor the students and offer real world experience. “I bring back alumni who are working musicians so that my students always experience current music trends.” She quickly discovered that self-taught musicians, when compared to traditionally-trained musicians, often use a different vocabulary when discussing chord structure, form, feel, and other

musical components of a song. Under-terred, the young musicians have been quick to establish a shared vocabulary in order to create an efficient rehearsal environment.

When asked about gaining support for the ensemble, Hankins notes that after conversing with students and colleagues, she then approached her administration. After securing their approval, she met with the parent body to pitch the idea. She quickly added their unwavering support to the growing list interested and excited about the possibilities that this new ensemble produced. Hankins then applied for multiple grants and reached out to alumni, hoping to secure the additional funding necessary to purchase the needed equipment including microphones, amplifiers, and electric violins, violas, and cellos. As for the rhythm section equipment, the ensemble used the students’ personal

instruments until the organization could afford the additional purchases.

When starting a new program, Hankins suggests that a music educator should “surround yourself with people who can help you. I scheduled our first concert before we could play a song, and that motivated us to push through obstacles, find solutions, and adjust as we moved forward.” The Lakewood Project performs a number of concerts each year ranging from on-campus concerts to the city’s Fourth of July celebration, where they regularly perform for over 10,000 people. “We provide the community with a three-hour concert that concludes with us performing with the opening of the fireworks display.” For their on-campus shows, Hankins reveals the students “turn the pit into a huge dance party as they scream for their friends and sing along to the performance.” In the years since the founding of the ensemble,

“Instead of striving to get ratings, I strive to bring longevity, joy, and independence.” —Beth Hankins



they have gone on to perform at the Cleveland House of Blues, the American String Teachers Association National Convention, and in the place where it all started—the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

When asked about her teaching style, Hankins readily admits that she sets high standards for herself, the students, and the program. “I strive for

excellence at all times; however, I do encourage and enjoy an open dialogue with my students. I encourage my students to voice their opinions and provide suggestions.” As part of a continued effort to involve her students in every aspect of the ensemble, the areas of bowings, phrasings, and fingerings are often considered. “This takes a little longer, but the students

learn how to support their ideas, grasp how to be open-minded to others’ ideas, and are not afraid to try new things. They are always thinking about how it could be better.”

In addition to the aforementioned string groups, the Lakewood High School music program is home to upwards of 15 ensembles, including band, jazz, and choral groups. The efforts of Hankins and her colleagues have not gone unnoticed. Lakewood High School has been recognized by NAMM as a Best Community for Music Education both in 2017 and



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2018. Individually, Hankins was named the Ohio String Teacher of the Year in 2003, and has been nominated for a GRAMMY® Music Educator Award three times. In 2016, she was recognized as a quarterfinalist, and in 2017 she was named one of the 10 finalists for that honor.

Hankins hopes that her students will “learn how to create their own musical opportunities that will last a lifetime.” Over the years, her educational philosophy has changed, in part due to her efforts with both traditional and nontraditional ensembles, which then led to her pursuit a PhD beginning in 2010. Her doctoral research focused on



WITH BETH HANKINS

Q What do you know to be true about teaching music that you didn't know when you started? Music provides hope, healing, and a safe place for all people. All music impacts humans and should be treasured and taught.

Q If I weren't a music teacher I would ... probably be either in the field of law or a performing music professionally.

Q What's the biggest lesson you want your students to learn while in your program? Do your best at all times. You do not have to know everything. Surround yourself with people who can help you find answers so that you can attain your goal.

Q The music education profession would be better if ... more music professionals would give back to youth by being present and providing educators and students the bridge that connects the classroom to their real world.

Q What have you learned about students and parents through your work? Parents want their children to be happy, and students want to be able to experiment and be accepted. Allowing students to explore music and develop their musical voice gives them a chance to grow.

Q What advice would you give to a teacher trying to start a program similar to yours? I would suggest that they not start a program like mine. Instead, see what type of ensemble their students would like to experience and go from there. Each corner of the country has their own unique vibe. Capture it.

“I scheduled our first concert before we could play a song, and that motivated us to push through obstacles, find solutions, and adjust as we moved forward.”

the learning outcomes of students involved in the Lakewood Project and how those students kept music in their lives once they left her tutelage. As part of her research, Hankins sent out surveys to every graduate of the Lakewood Project. Of those who responded, 90 percent continue to be involved in music as a hobby or career. “I now view music as a language to be taught so that people can create, read,

share, listen, respond, analyze, and enjoy instead of a series of skills that need to be acquired in order to perform a piece. This may seem simple, but it has changed how I teach. Instead of striving to get ratings, I strive to bring longevity, joy, and independence.”

You can learn more about the Lakewood Project and Hankins by visiting their website at LakewoodProject.com. ■

Photos by Alex Belisle Photography. Headshot by Trish Hendy.