

En Avant Ensemble offering needed music education

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The music emanating from the Unitarian Church in Brunswick last week offered a welcome sound for anyone concerned about the large-scale disruption the pandemic has had on music education for students.

Around 20 students assembled inside the church for their first rehearsal with the new En Avant Ensemble offered by the Golden Isles Youth Orchestra.

The after-school strings program is serving seventh- and eighth-grade students whose music classes at school have not returned or have been significantly altered since the pandemic began.

Among the gathered students was Sherri Rook, who had about a year's worth of education on the cello when COVID-19 forced her music classes at Needwood Middle School to cease.

"Unfortunately, the program at my school was shut down this year due to COVID, meaning I couldn't get a second year of classes," said Rook, now in the eighth grade.

Schools are offering in-person instruction this year, but administrators have had to make some tough decisions and in some cases could not offer certain programs in a COVID-friendly manner.

Among the classes temporarily cut or changed were the strings programs at Risley and Needwood middle schools. Jane Macon Middle does not have its own strings program.

Students participating in the En Avant program were in either sixth or seventh grade when schools closed and transitioned to at-home learning in March 2020.

Emily Everman, an eighth-grader at Risley Middle School who plays the string bass, said her music classes look significantly different this year. She hopes En Avant will help her improve her technique and meet new friends with an interest in music.

"It gives me the chance to become better at my instrument and gives me the opportunity to play more since we are only playing every other day right now at school," she said. "I am very grateful to have this opportunity, and I am excited to get to play with the GIYO."

The youth orchestra worked with principals and educators to launch En Avant Ensemble, said JoAnn Davis, who leads the orchestra's musician development committee. All students involved have been enthusiastic about the opportunity, she said, and the youth orchestra is lending instruments to those who need them.

"We're just adapting to the current situation," Davis said.

Misty Renard, orchestra instructor at Glynn Middle School and a professional strings musician, is serving as the program's lead instructor. She introduced herself last week to the students during their first rehearsal, much of which was devoted to getting everyone on the same page.

“Today’s a little bit about experimenting to see where we all are,” she told the students.

Older students are supporting the program by serving as mentors. Among that group is Emma Clarke, an 11th-grade student and a violin player. Learning and rehearsing music with others is beneficial to a student’s overall progress, she said, and the program will hopefully help young musicians improve their skills.

“When you have to play with other people you have to make sure your timing’s correct,” she said. “You’ve got to listen to everyone else. You can’t just do your own thing.”

GIYO alumna Zhane Waye is also lending her experience and talent to the program.

Now a sophomore at Wake Forest University studying music and neuroscience, Waye was a participant in strings programs for 10 years.

She said she benefited from consistent music education through her school years in Glynn County, from her days at St. Simons Elementary to her senior year at Frederica Academy. She joined GIYO in eighth grade.

“GIYO’s always been a really helpful resource in the community for string education especially,” Waye said. “I’m glad they’re starting this to help some of these students that have lost the opportunity to play during school time. It’s great that they will at least have the opportunity to play elsewhere.”

Glynn County Schools has partnered with GIYO to make the program possible because many recognize the importance of continuing to offer music education to students, Davis said.

Research shows that music has significant positive influences on academic performance, she said.

“I don’t know that it matters what instrument you play, but there is lots of research that shows that listening and concentration is important,” Davis said.

GIYO formed 18 years ago with a goal to bring music opportunities to the community’s youth. This year, the organization has had to think outside the box to continue its mission during the pandemic, which has made music education a challenge to provide to students en masse.

“It really is serious that school instruction has been so curtailed,” Davis said. “... We’re hoping that it will return in the fall.”

For students like Rook, though, En Avant Ensemble is the only way to continue receiving cello instruction until her school resumes its strings program.

“I hope to gain lots of experience in this program,” she said. “... This will give me lots of learning and growth opportunities as well as continue the learning process that I had started last year and was supposed to start this year.”