




IC Professor Conducts Boynton Orchestra

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An Ithaca Public Education Initiative (IPEI) Red and Gold Grant is helping the Boynton Middle School Orchestra learn first-hand what it's like to work as professional musicians. The grant enabled Diana Geiger, Boynton instrumental music teacher, to bring community partner Dr. James Mick, Ithaca College (IC) Assistant Professor of Music Education, to Boynton to lead several professional-style rehearsals.

"He's an absolute master teacher," Geiger said. "Without the grant, I don't think we would have been able to afford this. I like to give the students one professional experience each year."

Geiger is one of 67 teachers and others to receive a Red and Gold Grant so far this academic year. Red and Gold Grants are awards for one-time projects that strengthen and enrich Ithaca schools. May 6 is the next deadline for Red and Gold Grant application submissions; the awards of up to \$500 are announced within two weeks.

Mick will conduct Tchaikovsky's "Serenade for Strings" at the orchestra's spring concert on Thursday, May 9 at 7:00 p.m. at the Ithaca High School Performing Arts Center's Kulp Auditorium. The concert is free and open to the public.

In preparation, Mick has been breaking the piece down into sections for students, teaching bowing techniques and practicing scales with different rhythms. He has also brought his IC students to Boynton to observe and assist.

"The project is about becoming a professional musician," Geiger said. "He teaches about being prepared and staying engaged, things adult musicians need to do. He's really trying to bring that out in the kids."

"I reinforce what Diana does in class with them every day," Mick said. "Hearing it from another source is great. It's a new voice so it has meaning. It's something different so it allows the energy and pace of the ensemble to change."

Geiger added: "He's different from me. He has a bit of a different background. We could say the exact same things, but the students hear it differently."

Eighth-grade violinist Sophie Izzo said: "He focuses more on the instrumental groups, like the violins, violas and cellos. He dissects the piece."

"He works on different skills than Ms. Geiger does because she has her own style of teaching," said eighth-grade violinist Sophia Cotraccia. "He uses a lot of metaphors."

In one rehearsal, Mick worked with students on volume and tempo. "Great compositions such as this one take us on a journey," he told the group. "We know that the tempo helps us on that journey. This is Tchaikovsky; he's really known for his gut-wrenching music." Using descriptors such as "snappy" and "sticky," Mick directed students to "really make it pop out." Next, he told them to prepare to drop "elevator levels." "It's not a smooth ride," he said. "You're hitting the ceiling as we go down."

Cotraccia said that rather than asking students to “just play louder,” Mick has taught them techniques for accomplishing this, such as “using less bow and less pressure.” “We’ve learned a lot about different dynamics,” she said.

Cotraccia and Izzo both said they enjoyed having Mick’s students visit. “They were lively and they grabbed people’s attention because they were young and energetic,” Izzo said. “They were good teachers, and they helped us practice parts of the music over and over until we got it right.”

“It was neat to think that they’re students, too, and we were helping them as much as they were helping us,” Cotraccia said.

Mick echoed this benefit from the collaboration. “I always want to be in the public schools,” he said. “This is vital for my field, to stay up to date. The same issues have been around in public schools for years, but it’s the wrapping that changes; it’s good to come in and see that wrapping. What remains the same is that kids want to achieve, be successful and feel important. Successful teachers, no matter what they teach, try to do this.”

“He’s been really great and responsive, and the kids are learning a lot from him,” Geiger said, noting that such an experience is important for students serious about music. “I have at least six students who are looking into colleges for music already. There are many others who will continue in community orchestras throughout their lives. I know many have developed a deeper understanding of music through this project.”

“IPEI is a great group to work with,” Geiger added. “They do so much for the community, especially helping us to bring in community partners for projects. I really appreciate what they do.”

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