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Building music repertoire in Robbinsdale Area Schools

Not long after Markus Hahn began directing the Cooper High School band, he told the ensemble they were going to play a piece by Clare Grundman. Afterward, a student named Lydia Nordstrom told Hahn how excited she was: “It’s the first time I’ve played a piece by a woman!”

Grundman, an American composer who died in 1996, was a man.

Hahn said that experience “brought into focus how important it is for students to see a diverse set of [composer] names and, if they choose to look those individuals up, a diverse set of appearances.”

Robbinsdale Area Schools fine arts coordinator Sarah Prindiville says the district’s “fine arts staff has been talking about representation for years. The resources we have are not representative of the students in our buildings.”

“In the field of music education, this is a nationwide issue. Our whole field is having a watershed moment over repertoire and performance practice that largely reflects Western European thought and customs. Collectively, we’re coming to the realization that ‘the way we’ve always done it’ leaves out a lot of people and groups.”

She adds, “In our district, we see a need to add resources that are more representative of our students.”
Adding diversity to the works performed by student musicians is one of the goals of this year’s Bird Bash, the annual fundraising event of the Seven Dreams Education Foundation, taking place on Saturday, Feb. 5. Approximately one-fifth of the money raised at this event will help to purchase new pieces for the district’s band, orchestra, and choral ensembles. The balance of the funding contributed will help purchase new instruments, repair those currently in use, and bring in resident artists to work with students.

“Repertoire is a huge conversation,” says Anastasia Verdoljak, who teaches strings at Sandburg and Plymouth Middle Schools and Armstrong High. She mentions Edmond Dédé, a 19th century Black Creole composer who is not exactly a household name among classical music lovers. In an effort to change that, members of the Black Composer Revival Consortium have pooled their funding to orchestrate works by composers like Dédé for student ensembles. For Dédé’s work Mephisto Masque, the contemporary African American composer Lawren Brianna Ware created a version that Verdoljak programmed for Armstrong’s orchestra last fall. The Consortium’s notes on the piece include the following:

This project works to provide a counter-narrative to the mainstream concert band and string orchestra curriculum of today. By bringing together the work of Lawren Brianna Ware and Edmund Dédé, we are purposefully highlighting the musically historical contributions of Black composers. Simply put, few students in our ensembles have an understanding of the historical depth and breadth of the work composed by Black American composers throughout history. By presenting this counter-narrative, we provide mirrors and windows in our curriculum to our students: mirrors for our African American students and windows for our non-African American students.

Along with the music instructors who commented for this article, clarinetist and Cooper senior Emma Borisevich believes a balanced repertoire is ideal: “Playing traditional pieces is part of being in band.” She also notes that it’s a “cool opportunity, and important, to play works by living people, women, and persons of color.” Emma especially enjoyed a recent Metro West All-Conference Band Festival, when she met composer Erika Svanoe, who both wrote and conducted a new piece for the ensemble. “She gave us background on the piece we wouldn’t have had otherwise.”

Robbinsdale’s music instructors and directors are participants in what Prindiville asserts is “a national movement, throughout the whole field. The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra and Minnesota Orchestra are starting to take steps in the direction of diversifying their repertoire.” Says Prindiville: “They know they have a responsibility to center other voices and underrepresented composers, styles, and genres.”
Clearly, the music programs of Robbinsdale Area Schools are in excellent company.

This year’s **Bird Bash** benefit is entitled **Reinvigorating Band & Orchestra: Spreading the Joy of Music to ALL Students.** The Seven Dreams Education Foundation’s ninth annual fundraising event will help the district’s music programs to welcome all students and build community. Providing instruments, vibrant musical compositions, and professional mentors will strengthen the district’s proud music traditions.

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The mission of Robbinsdale Area Schools is to inspire and educate all learners to develop their unique potential and positively contribute to their community. Robbinsdale Area Schools serves approximately 12,000 students in seven communities in the northwest Twin Cities area, including Brooklyn Center, Brooklyn Park, Crystal, Golden Valley, New Hope, Plymouth and Robbinsdale. There are 11 elementary schools, four middle schools, two high schools, an alternative high school and a robust Community Education program that serves learners of all ages.