

Two days a week for the past two school years, I have looked forward to coming to the music room at Birch Creek Elementary. Your energy, frankness, smiles, and musicianship were refreshing. I want to express some of the memories and feelings I have regarding our orchestra experience together.

First with Mrs. Olson, the no-nonsense cellist, we started from the very beginning. Remember how we learned how to tighten and hold the bow? How hard it was to remember the names of the open strings and play them straight without scratching? Slowly, we mastered the notes on the D string and then cautiously moved to other strings and fingerings. Remember when you overcame nerves and played on stage in front of hundreds of people? We played simple songs like the *Les Toreadors*, *Bunny Hop*, and *Good King Wenceslas*. At the end of that first December concert, you almost brought tears to my eyes (because I was so proud, not because it sounded bad)! In the spring, we had family guests come and see how much hard work it takes to play a string instrument. I'll never forget the intense faces of the parents trying to play *We Will Rock You* correctly! We kept making little improvements at each rehearsal to prepare to perform fun songs like *Indian Drums*, *Fiddler's Frolic*, and *Dragonslayer*.

The next year you became a 2nd-year student. We lost Hayden, Brandon, and McKinley, but we gained the pleasant violinist, Ms. Dupree. With more focus and practice, we progressed to play classical songs like *Brandenburg* and *Largo*, as well as other favorites like *Up On The Housetop* and *Mambo*. You came to understand more key signatures, like C Major with its low 2s and F Major with its pesky B-flats. You expanded the use of your bow to play slurs, staccatos, crescendos, and diminuendos. You learned to feel those tricky rhythms like dotted quarter notes, 3/4 time, ritardandos, and fermatas. Just recently in the school assembly, you outshined the 1st-years with your additional year of experience. In our intimate ensemble of six students, you have grown into strong performers capable of playing a harmony part by yourself! All this musical development equipped you to tackle complex songs like *Harvest Reel*, *Simon Tov*, *Spring*, *The Star-Spangled Banner*, and of course *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

Even though you think of me as your teacher, please know that I have learned much from each of you. At the university I have been filling my brain with math and science, but in orchestra you have been filling my heart with music. Thank you for lifting my spirits. As I move forward in my teaching career, you shall always be remembered fondly as my very first graduating class!

While I don't expect you to become professional string players (although you could), I do expect that you will fill your life with positive music. I hope you will find as much excitement in a symphony orchestra concert as you do at a rock concert – I know I do. Live by the important things we learned from each other in orchestra: teamwork, independence, creativity, listening, continual improvement, and 'hard things take work but are worth it in the end'. When life gets hard, just keep smiling and pushing forward and say to yourself, "Hey, I already learned how to play a string instrument. This can't be much more difficult than that!"

Take care of yourselves, and please keep in touch < ken.ben@aggiemail.usu.edu >