FOCUS on fun with music!

Project STEP’s FOCUS program introduces the pleasures of music to kindergartners, and they soak it up. FOCUS begins with the basic elements of music: melody, simple harmony, pitch, and rhythm. Children are recruited from the Boston Public School kindergartens, and many come from the Greater Boston area as well. The program combines beginning music instruction with demonstrations of many types of music and instruments. The result, in a current parent’s words:

“I have to say how amazed my husband and I are with the influence a musical environment has had on our son…. after a couple months of playing Teachers and great program you have.

- Parent of a FOCUS 2008 student

Every Saturday, students take three classes: recorder, singing (solfège), and enrichment. The enrichment class is a 30-minute concert which showcases classical and jazz performers. This is always a highlight of the program and once again, Patricia Dance has enlisted the services of some of the area’s most exciting professionals to share with FOCUS students and parents alike. Additionally, Ms. Dance, through an arrangement with the Boston Symphony Orchestra’s Education Department, will take her classes to the Boston Symphony Orchestra’s Family Concert in May.

FOCUS Faculty: Patricia Dance (FOCUS Director), Miyuki Tsurutani (Recorder Instructor), and Adonis Martin (Accompanist). Well over 100 children applied to FOCUS this year, which began on Saturday, February 2nd and concludes with a final recital on Saturday, May 17th.

Student Life

William Thomas

The Project STEP community regrets to announce that William Thomas, Artistic Director of Project STEP, will step down at the end of the 2007 – 2008 season. After an illustrious career in music anchored by his prominent role at Philips Academy, Andover, and including founding the Cambridge Community Chorus and three extraordinary years at Project STEP, he will move back home to Lexington, KY. In just three years at STEP, his impact has been impressive. He tripled the number of first grader STEP accepted, creating a wide base of students in the program called the Young Training Division. He also instituted a community service requirement where each student must give a performance annually at a venue in their own communities. Students perform in churches, nursing homes, schools and hospitals. Mr. Thomas led the STEP Chamber Orchestra on numerous occasions in public performances, notably at events such as the new Governor’s Inaugural Ball at the Boston Convention Center in January, 2007 and at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Breakfast in January, 2008. He was recently awarded the New England Conservatory / Anna Bobbitt Gardner and Coretta Scott King Lifetime Achievement Award by The Gospel Jubilee for his extraordinary influence on young music students. We will miss Mr. Thomas’ gentle wisdom, his matchless metaphors, his unbounded ambition for STEP, his belief in each and every student, and his relentless pursuit of cadore alongside respect in a multi-racial and multi-cultural organization.

Breaking News!

Project STEP will perform with the Boston Pops Orchestra this May! The performance will be at the Partners Symphony Hall, Boston Pops Night, Thursday, May 29th, 8 p.m.

The BSO has offered Project STEP students and families a marvelous ticket package to its concerts, focusing on concerts with violin soloists during the next season, 2008-2009. STEP will find a match for the BSO’s generosity, and Project STEP students will be regular members of the BSO audience.

Project STEP’s Community Service is supported by funding from the Harvard Musical Association.
Alyssa Daly with a fan at The Little Sister of the Poor

Mrs. T (no relation to Mr. T)

“The parents are completely involved, and a joy to work with. The children are also stimulated by the program, every one eager to learn,” says Gwendolyn Thornblad of her First Year group of six year olds. Mrs. Thornblade (known as Mrs. T to her students) does not have your average music teacher background. She played violin as a child, then graduated to the viola as she grew older, but her professional training was as a dentist in her native England. She says it is enormously fulfilling to have her students want to come to her as a violin teacher – we can imagine it beats being the dreaded dentist!

When she switched careers in the early 1970’s she trained to teach Suzuki with master teachers including a week in Japan with Dr. Suzuki himself. In 1986 she founded the Newton Suzuki School. Dr. Honda, a Suzuki supporter, wrote an influential book called “Suzuki changed my life.” Gwendolyn’s late husband Jim used to say to her, “Suzuki changed my wife.” The First Year group is taught using the Suzuki method, including note reading. Children learn to watch a leader and lead a group themselves - they each get a chance to be teacher, with Mrs. T in the class. They learn to perform for each other, how to respond to performances, and how to bow.

In individual lessons they learn technique as they progress through the repertoire. At home they work with their parents, as well as listening to recordings of their pieces. Morgan Howell is a much-loved intern from Brookline High School who works with the children while Mrs. T talks with the parents, discussing their role as practicing partners.

Lauren Brown, viola, made the finals in the New England Conservatory’s Preparatory School Concerto Competition. Lauren had passed through the preliminaries held one week prior to the finals and competed in the finals on Sunday, November 18th, performing the first and second movements of J. C. Bach’s Concerto in C minor for Two Violins, featuring Teddy Wiggins and Danielle Lennox-Heichman, which was received with a standing ovation by the audience. Conducted by William Thomas, the orchestra also performed “Au” from the Third Orchestral Suite in D Major by J.S. Bach. The day’s activities concluded with an evening performance with the Boston Children’s Chorus at Jordan Hall at the New England Conservatory. Nine of the Project STEP string players (Abina Cohen, violin; Danielle Lennox-Heichman, violin; Aurelie Théarême, violin; Teddy Wiggins, violin; Serena Hafetz, viola; and Njeri Grevi, viola) performed with the Boston Pops.

Three STEP students, Njeri Grevi, violin; Lauren Brown, viola; and Jordan Calixto, bass were chosen to perform as members of NEC Preparatory School’s String Chamber Orchestra at A Feast of Music, NEC’s annual scholarship gala on February 23 at the Grand Ballroom at Fairmont Copley Plaza, Boston. A Feast of Music, a spectacular dinner evening to benefit the NEC General Scholarship Fund, has raised 2 million dollars over the past ten years. The event brings together about 450 of Boston’s most prominent business leaders and cultural philanthropists.

Why were Project STEP students asked to perform with the Boston Pops? Q: Where did these students receive their musical education? A: They were chosen to perform as members of NEC Preparatory School’s String Chamber Orchestra at A Feast of Music, NEC’s annual scholarship gala on February 23 at the Grand Ballroom at Fairmont Copley Plaza, Boston.

Master Class Not Snowed Out! Bad news: Grammy Award Winner John McLaughlin Williams’ flight was cancelled due to the storm February 22, preventing him from leading the Project STEP master class that weekend. Good news: Project STEP has depth to its “bench.” Mariana Greenhill, a former STEP violin student, has been chosen to take his place. The class was received with a standing ovation by the students and teachers.

STEP notes

The Project STEP video, shown at the 25th Anniversary Celebration, won “Silver Medal, World” at the 2008 Film and Video Awards in New York City in late January for its producers, Northern Light Productions, Boston. The category was “FD, Non-Prof.”

Project STEP was awarded a grant of musical instruments from Mr. Holland’s Opus Foundation. The foundation will purchase a total of twelve new, quality instruments for STEP, beginning with six ¾ sized violins.

Project STEP has new offices! We are now located in newly renovated space at Symphony Hall, and our instrument collection is now safely and dryly housed next to the two offices. Our neighbors are the Tanglewood Music Festival offices, the Credit Union, a cool new lounge and eating area, a conference room, and six brand new practice rooms. Come visit!

Student Life

MTL Day

Creary, viola; Monique Smith, viola; Martin Laffhute, ‘cello; Adrya Sanchez, ‘cello; Jordan Calixto, string bass) accompanied the Chorus and Boston Symphony Orchestra’s Ann Hobson Pilot, harp, in Isaiah 44:3 from Thoughts and Remembrances by Jackson Berkey.

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Be an Instrument of Change!

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Q: Why was Jennifer Lee asked to perform with the Boston Pops?

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They/Them/Their

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