

ROCK STAR SESSIONS

Music pros give boost to Lincoln's electric orchestra

Amanda Karioth Thompson
Council on Culture & Arts

Though Metallica, Journey, and Guns N' Roses songs aren't typically part of an orchestra's repertoire, they're top priority for Lincoln High School's new electric orchestra. Not only are the students playing electric instruments and focusing on rock music, they got the chance to learn from a rock icon.

Recording artist, performer, producer, inventor, Emmy-winning composer and music education advocate Mark Wood rose to fame as string master and original member of the internationally acclaimed Trans-Siberian Orchestra. He has spent the past four decades electrifying the orchestra industry and his most recent stop was in Tallahassee, thanks to Clara Knotts.

As the director of orchestras at Lincoln and Swift Creek Middle School, Knotts is determined to "meet my students where they are. What's on their phones? It's not always Beethoven and Mozart. I love that kind of music and it's important stuff, but we've got to change what we've been doing."

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Mark Wood and
Carter Nelson play
"Enter Sandman" by
Metallica at Lincoln
High School. AMANDA
THOMPSON



Orchestra

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Students have eagerly embraced the school's new rock ensemble which launched at the beginning of this school year. "They've only had a few months of work and they've done well," said Knotts. "They love to come rehearse after school and they ask how long they can stay. To see kids go from super introverted, not wanting to talk, not moving, to literally jumping around my classroom. It's really cool."

Wood has seen this transformation many times. "We're doing two to three school groups a week. Orchestras of all different sizes at universities, high schools, middle and elementary schools," he said.

As a classically trained violist who attended Juilliard on a full scholarship, Wood understands that some musicians feel constrained by tradition and the industry.

"Musicians like us, we live in a bubble, in our own planet from touring. We're focused on that, playing arenas in front of thousands of people. Students are much more interested in something that's cutting edge, otherwise it just continues to be the same. The new messaging for our students is to amplify the experience you're having and share it with the community."

Wood and his wife, vocalist Laura Kaye, co-founded Electrify Your Strings!, a music education program that boosts student self-esteem and motivation, increases school-wide, family and community engagement, and helps raise money for participating schools. Through an Arts Education Grant from the Council on Culture & Arts and additional support from many other area businesses and organizations, Knotts was able to bring Wood and his band to Lincoln for an unforgettable learning and performance experience.

Over the course of three days, Wood worked with about 80 emerging musicians from Lincoln, Swift Creek and Montford Middle School. There were rehearsals where students perfected technique, choreography, and stage presence; a master class offering tips on songwriting and learning music by ear; and a public performance featuring Wood's own compositions and his arrangements of classic rock and contemporary music.

Carter Nelson is in the 12th grade at Lincoln. He's been studying guitar seriously since he was a middle school student at Swift Creek and was drawn to the instrument by "watching my favorite shredders and the best guitarists. They do that in front of thousands of people and it's cool to play your own music and have the audience sing back and enjoy what you're doing."

For the public performance, Carter played solos in "Crazy Train" and "Sweet Child of Mine." He enjoyed working with Wood to improve his playing and shared "it's always weird working with a super professional because they've done everything and they're perfect technically and they know all the little things to add. Mark told me to arpeggiate one chord, and it completely changed the vibe."

Though 10th-grader Rose Sembler has come to music relatively recently, she's already recognized "there are so many skills you learn from studying music, like discipline, time manage-



Vocalist Laura Kaye coaches students on "Sweet Child of Mine" at Lincoln High School. AMANDA THOMPSON



Lincoln students got to play unusual instruments like "Viper" electric violins which Mark Wood invented.

AMANDA THOMPSON

ment, improvisation, communication, teamwork. We're all working together towards the same goal and that's bettering ourselves as a team." Just a few years ago, she started learning the piano and she added drums once she heard about the rock ensemble.

"Doing piano really helped me to read sheet music, though sheet music for drums is vastly different. Using my leg, when it comes to the pedals on the piano, has helped with my kick drum and my high hat. Now I use all four limbs and I'm thinking about how I can incorporate that back into piano."

The transfer of skills is something Knotts is especially interested in and has identified as one of the goals for the rock ensemble. "My kids that are in both the rock ensemble and the regular orchestra have grown tremendously. I have some that are like 'I don't really like rock music' but I tell them it's not about the music, it's about what you learn."

Wood agrees and knows that by studying music, students are tapping



Tenth-grader Rose Sembler has taken up the drums to play in Lincoln's rock ensemble. AMANDA THOMPSON

into intellectual and emotional capacities that no other experience can provide. During a question and answer session with the students he said "don't look at your instrument as an instrument, look at it as a vehicle to travel. We are here to travel into the unknown and that's where the action is."

Amanda Karioth Thompson is the Assistant Director for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).

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