

At widely separated schools on and near the Navajo and Hopi reservations of Arizona and southern Utah, high school kids are composing string quartets. The Grand Canyon Chamber Music Festival—with a resident ensemble and composer—makes it work.

**E**ric Swanson, who teaches music at Chinle High School on Arizona's Navajo Reservation, wants me to know about the poverty and isolation there. "There's a 42 percent unemployment rate here," he says, "and almost fifty percent of families have incomes under \$9,000 a year." As for the arts, it's a sparse environment: "If you drive 90 or 100 miles you might hear music four times a year."

The district has recently shed many of its music programs because of budget cuts, so the Chinle students are clearly lucky that their school has held on to Swanson, a guitarist/mandolinist with a degree in guitar pedagogy who moved to Arizona from Utah four years ago. Many of the kids who take his classes play guitar, but they may or may not read music. So he starts out with basics, teaching them how

to build chords. But probably the most important gifts Swanson offers his students are his "Aesthetic Listening Sessions." No one is ever late for those classes, he reports, during which he plays CDs of every conceivable type: string quartets, symphonies, Cajun or Japanese music, Indian ragas. Swanson's only criterion is that the works are regarded as masterpieces in their respective genres.

Chinle's music students are lucky in another way. For the past three summers, six to eight of them have taken part in NACAP—the Native American Composers Apprentice Project—an intensive composition and performance program operated by the Grand Canyon Chamber Music Festival, a presenter based on the canyon's South Rim, three-hours' drive away.

That NACAP exists, serving students at

five widely separated schools, much less that it is going into its ninth season, says a lot about the dedication and vision of Clare Hoffman, a flutist and the Grand Canyon festival's co-founding artistic director. Soon after its beginnings in 1984, the festival began to provide outreach concerts, touring to Navajo and Hopi schools on the reservations, a vast area covering the entire northeastern corner of the state (plus a bit of southern Utah and New Mexico). Conceding that these concerts, though worthy, were "exposure, but nothing much in depth," Hoffman had always wanted to do more.

The NACAP concept germinated at the festival a decade ago. Composer/flutist Brent Michael Davids, of the Mohican nation, was present, as was Native American flutist R. Carlos Nakai. Davids, who had

BY ELLEN GOLDENSOHN

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Composer and flutist Brent Michael Davids, left, the project's first composer-in-residence, is the originator of many of its key practices.

begun composing as a 16-year-old high school student in the Midwest, had some very specific thoughts on how Native American compositional voices might be nurtured. If a compositional program targeted indigenous teenagers, he believed, they would become role models for the younger kids on the rez. Hoffman, too, wanted something that focused on individuals, and something that involved the festival's visiting chamber musicians.

Hoffman and Davids put their heads together, and the idea that took shape ten years ago is still the basic program today. For several weeks each August—the beginning of the school year in Arizona—the NACAP composer-in-residence travels to the participating schools to give a crash course in the art of composition. The goal? Each student will compose a two-minute work for two violins, viola and cello. In September, a professional string quartet arrives and also makes the rounds of the schools, working with the apprentice composers to realize their concepts on the

actual instruments. The completed works are then performed by the string quartet at elementary schools, in the composers' own high schools, and—in mid-September—recorded and premiered at a festival venue in the town of Grand Canyon. Whole families, as well as teachers and friends, may undertake the major car or bus trip to the South Rim to share in this event.

So that participating students can get an overview of program expectations, NACAP's work in each school begins with a composer-led, two-hour group orientation session. In the first of the subsequent series of one-on-one lessons, the composer talks with each student about the material he or she has come in with. The student then goes home and works on the idea and comes back with more at the second lesson; by the fourth lesson, the piece is usually taking shape. When the composing process is finished, the work is entered into Sibelius, so that when NACAP's string-quartet-in-residence arrives, there's a score to work from.

Hoffman explains. "The kids may play guitar and may know only three or four chords. The composer's job is to help develop whatever the kids bring into the



Violinist Neil Dufallo, of ETHEL, works with an apprentice composer at Tuba City High School.

Below: Arizona's Monument Valley



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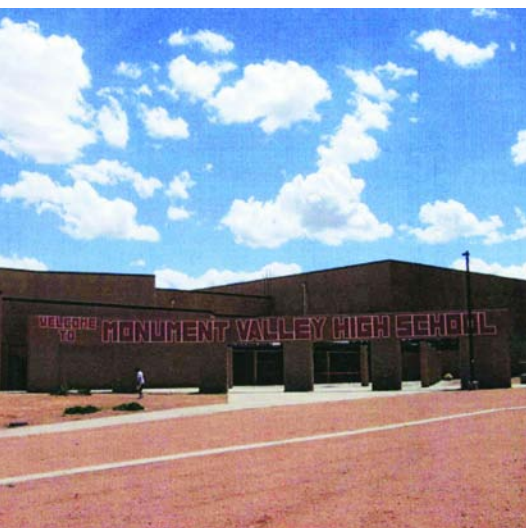
classroom, whether it's just a few chords, a whole piece, or just an idea. And the composition has to have a beginning and be brought to a convincing conclusion."

Since 2001, several composers have worked on the project. Brent Michael Davids was first; he was followed by David Mallamud, Jerod Impichchaachahá Tate (Chickasaw nation), and Adam Overton. NACAP's current composer-in-residence is Raven Chacon, who grew up in Chinle and Albuquerque, and like the majority of his students, is of Navajo descent. What kind of music do these high-schoolers write for string quartet? Reports Chinle High's Eric Swanson: "A lot of dissonance comes out, not necessarily because they like dissonance, but because they're unaware that it is dissonant."

But sometimes apparent compositional eccentricities are purposeful and meaningful. Says Hoffman: "One of the first years, when Jerod Tate was here, a kid had written a mixed-meter piece, and Jerod wasn't sure the student intended it. But then Michael Begay [a NACAP apprentice at the time and now Raven Chacon's assistant composer-in-residence] identified the meter as the pattern of a Navajo dance."

Getting the students' ideas down on paper may present a challenge, but not

Monument Valley High School, in Kayenta, on the Navajo Reservation



At Grey Hills Academy, in Tuba City, ETHEL's Ralph Farris and a student work on interpretation.

always. "If they are enrolled in my class, says Blair Quamahongnewa, the music teacher at Tuba City High School on the Hopi reservation, "they are required to learn how to read and write music. That takes pressure off the [NACAP] teacher. And I can explain techniques of string music, such as harmonics, et cetera."

"When we first started," says Raven Chacon, "it was the preference that the kids in the program have the ability to read notes. But [now] many schools have dropped their music programs, and more and more I am seeing students who don't have that ability. What I *don't* like to do is notate it *for* them.

"Though some of the students are limited when they don't have the skills to read or write Western notation, it becomes clear when working with them just how limited Western notation is for the music that they want to write. Sometimes we have them make up some graphical system of their own, or I'll teach them some basic notations and then I ask them to compose using a few notes. I call it a 'song,' but it might be four pitches, all half notes. The difference is in the inflections of the notes—much as it might be in Navajo music."

The first ensemble to work with NACAP was the Miró Quartet, in residence at the festival in 2001. Then came the Corigliano, the Avalon and the Calder quartets. In the last three years, however, ETHEL—the New York-based, Juilliard-trained, genre-busting rock/jazz/improvisational string quartet—has become a NACAP regular. For the apprentice composers, the arrival of the quartet

means hearing their work performed on the intended instruments for the first time. Says Clare Hoffman: "The ensemble members ask the kids: 'Is this what you wanted?'—the same way they would work with any composer. As with any composition, what is on the page isn't the whole thing. The students have to express themselves."

At first, eliciting performance critiques from kids may be difficult. But Chinle's Eric Swanson reports, "ETHEL are not only great artists, they're wonderful with kids—they make them feel like the center of the world. And these kids have never been at the center of anything. It's especially good for the really quiet ones."

**"You are important. You can express yourself here and find joy, work—and yourself."**—Mary Rowell

"We were so taken with how much music all the kids have—their sense of time—slow and spacious, with bars of rests," says ETHEL violinist Mary Rowell. "One time, Dorothy [Dorothy Lawson, ETHEL's cellist] wanted to push the tempo, because she felt it was not going anywhere. She wanted to jazz it up. The kid said, 'No, I don't want that.' She got it. The culture uses music in everyday life and spiritual practice—there is a spirituality, even though they're often also into heavy metal."

For ETHEL the NACAP residency seems a natural fit. "It is so much a part of their mission, an outgrowth of what they're doing," says Hoffman. "They have embraced the project and have performed some of the student pieces all over the world." For its part, the ETHEL musicians say that they have been changed by NACAP. While touring once meant only superficial contact with the people and artists in any given region, the ensemble now seeks out—through its "Truck Stop" project—deeper musical and cultural con-



At Chinle High School, cellist Dorothy Lawson workshops a piece with one student, as others wait their turn.

nections throughout the U.S. and abroad.

But even for the most dedicated quartets and composers, the NACAP project is arduous. It means driving hundreds of miles between schools, usually visiting a more than one in a single day. “I am in the region for five weeks, says Chacon. “I’ll do one school in the morning and drive 100 miles to another school in the afternoon. Maybe each school gets a week and a half in all. We try to limit it to six or seven kids [in each school]; but sometimes others want to come in.”

Scheduling all those individual sessions can be tricky; after school a student may need to go home and herd sheep, or care for an elderly grandparent. And the youngsters typically live so far from town that they need to be on the school bus

without fail at a specific time. The schools have adjusted by allowing NACAP sessions to take place during school hours. To accomplish the program goals, says Clare Hoffman, you have to know the environment and be able to roll with punches.

That’s why, as the program grows, Hoffman is still fine-tuning the process. For the musicians, the teaching, the touring, plus the pre-festival recitals in the local elementary and high schools are “too many now and too exhausting.” And at the end there’s an NACAP affair where all the students from all the schools come in for one more session with the composer and the visiting musicians. Mary Rowell says, “Yes, it’s exhausting—but also wonderful. The program says: ‘Yes, you are important. Yes, you can express yourself

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here and find joy, work—and yourself.”

In Hoffman’s view, the benefits to the students—including the nonmusical gains—are priceless: “Setting a goal that seems impossible and realizing you can do it—you can take that knowledge anywhere.” And then there’s the likelihood of sparking a compositional career and/or a lifelong interest in music. One NACAP alumnus from Hopi High School went to Stanford University and is interested in pursuing medicine or the law, but he told Hoffman, “I will always be writing music.”

“We’re really committed to this,” says Hoffman. “It’s not a bizarre, arcane exercise. It’s challenging, but doable and worth doing.”

I ask Chinle High School’s Eric Swanson whether such a program—focusing on a handful of students every year in a handful of schools—makes a difference. Is it enough?

“It’s like having one beautiful flower,” says Swanson. “We’re lucky we have what we have. Yes, it might be great to have a whole bed of flowers. But the fact that we have one is kind of a miracle.”

*Ellen Goldensohn is the editor of Chamber Music magazine.*

Raven Chacon, NACAP’s current composer-in-residence

