

Symphony reaches out to students

April 10, 2008

By **ROBERT ELFINGER**

Many junior high school music students have listened to a professional concert from the typical position, seats in the audience.

But Northbrook Junior High School orchestra, chorus and band students have had the opportunity to take in a concert from a much different perspective.



Glenbrook North's John Jaffe works with Northbrook Junior High School students during Sunday's masters class at Glenbrook North High School.

(Jeff Krage/for Pioneer Press)



Glenbrook North's John Jaffe works with Northbrook Junior High School student Sarah Mendelson during Sunday's master's class at Glenbrook North High School.

(Jeff Krage/for Pioneer Press)

They are able to sit beside professional musicians during a final rehearsal and hone their own skills during small-group master classes led by professional musicians from the ensemble.

The students participated in youth education and enrichment programs offered by the 70-piece Northbrook Symphony Orchestra, founded in 1980.

"It was interesting to see how the clarinet part fits in as a whole," said eighth-grader Alex Damisch, who was among 13 Northbrook Junior High students who attended the symphony's concert Sunday at Glenbrook North High School.

The students observed a rehearsal, participated in a master class -- one for brass instruments, another for wind instruments -- and attended the concert, "The Art of Music," featuring Modeste Mussorgsky's "Pictures at An Exhibition."

The symphony launched the education programs for junior high students this school year to help nurture an appreciation for symphonic music in younger musicians, said its musical director, Lawrence Rapchak.

"We'd like to inspire students at an early age, and the junior high age is really a fabulous age to discover the wonders of music," Rapchak said. "This is the age where music really grabbed me, and it's more difficult to get into music later, because students become busy with so many other activities."

The experience begins with the guests taking a behind-the-scenes look at the orchestra's final rehearsal before the Sunday afternoon concert. Students then attend a 45-minute master's class led by a musician, receiving instruction, critiques and encouragement as they perform pieces they are working on at school.

To cap off the afternoon, students and their families get complimentary tickets to the concert.

Several students said they've gained new perspectives.

"It was interesting because even though they were really good already, they still were being told what to do and critiqued" by the conductor, sixth-grader Ethan Mathlin said.

"I learned how good you have to be with rhythm and counting," sixth-grader Emily Westel said. Some violinists "had to count 51 measures" before rejoining the orchestra, she noted.

"Our songs in orchestra are really easy compared to theirs," sixth-grader Marie Wojtan said. "What we do in class is like their warm-up."

Thirty-six Northbrook Junior High students have participated in the program in the past eight months.

Before the Sept. 30 concert, junior high string musicians participated in a master's class led by the symphony's principal bass player, Phillip Serna.

As part of the symphony's Nov. 11 concert, choir students worked on vocal exercises and their concert repertoire with a representative from Roosevelt University's Conservatory Chorus of the Chicago College of the Performing Arts.

A Jan. 20 master class brought together young cellists from Northbrook Junior High, Maple School and Wood Oaks Junior High to work with symphony cellist Lisa Lithall.

Chicago Symphony Orchestra clarinetist John Bruce Yeh, a guest soloist with the Northbrook Symphony in February, held a master class for young clarinet players before the Northbrook Symphony's Feb. 17 concert, and students from Northbrook Junior High, Glenbrook North and Glenview's Attea Middle School participated.

"Now they understand what an ensemble can sound like," said music teacher Sarah Stanley, who's notice students return from the program more prepared and motivated to practice.

With symphony orchestra attendance declining nation-wide, Rapchak hopes the enrichment programs inspire student musicians, and increase appreciation for symphonic music in area families.

"It's the planting of seeds that will bloom in the future," he said.

The pilot program was backed by the symphony's board of directors. Now it's looking to raise funds to expand the effort to other schools. For more information, call Sally Weiss at (847) 272-0755.