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Burch, Steve: **My Turn: Can a Non-String Player Teach Strings?**

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Steve Burch

I am a wolf in sheep's clothing. That is, I am a non-string player who, a few years ago, was confronted with teaching beginning strings at a middle school and at a high school. Woefully unprepared, I talked to other string teachers, looked at some method books from major publishers, and contemplated how I was going to keep seventh- and eighth-grade boys interested in playing instruments I didn't much like at their age.

A couple of years later I applied for a position at another high school with no string program. By this time I had really begun to enjoy teaching strings. I had also made some strides in my own playing abilities. I agreed to take the job on the condition that I would offer a beginning strings class. Within a couple of months we had twenty-four violins, twelve violas, six cellos, and three basses. Now, going into our third year at that school, we have two beginning classes and an intermediate-level string orchestra. We've made some nice progress, collecting mostly excellent and a few superior ratings at festivals.

Can a non-string-playing music teacher have success in teaching strings? From my own experience, the answer is a qualified yes. No doubt my students and program would be further along if they were taught by a teacher who really had specialized in strings. As a non-string player, I had to struggle and learn right alongside my students. A non-string player can become a string teacher if the teacher becomes at least a moderately good string player in the process.

Should non-string players try to start string programs in their schools if none exist? By all means, yes. If I had waited until I really knew how to play well, I probably would never have started one.

Let me make an appeal to two groups of music teachers: those who play strings and those who don't. To the non-string players, and especially high school teachers, I urge you to get a string program started at your school if one does not exist. Many people wrongly believe if students haven't started playing before high school that there is really no point in starting. I couldn't disagree more. High school students can make great progress in a short amount of time. They are usually more mature, and the class meets every day.

To those teachers who are advanced string players, I appeal to you to be a source of encouragement and help to those of us for whom a stringed instrument is a relatively new endeavor. Please don't turn up your noses at music teachers who don't have your knowledge and experience. I have heard experienced teachers dismiss the efforts of non-string-playing teachers, saying that they usually do more harm than good, and they shouldn't bother trying. If I had listened to that kind of nonsense, there would be three fewer string programs in three different public schools right now. Experienced string teachers have been a positive force in my short string-teaching career, providing valuable help and encouragement, while steering my efforts in developing solid technique. If you are an experienced string teacher, be a help rather than a hindrance.

Additionally, to the experienced string teachers, I ask you to broaden your horizons. String players and teachers know the classical literature very well but are often ignorant of the role that strings play in modern commercial music. They may know the work of players such as Joshua Bell, Midori, Yo-Yo Ma, or Itzhak Perlman, but they've never heard of the great jazz artists Joe Venuti, Stephane Grappelli, Regina Carter, or Stuff Smith. They may wax eloquent about the Brahms or the Copland violin concertos but don't know the difference between bluegrass and cowboy swing. If this describes you, then do yourself and your students a great service by branching out and discovering some of the rich heritage of string music that has been given to us outside the world of classical music.

Becoming a string teacher, and consequently a string player, has added a broad dimension to my professional and personal life. I have become so enamored of beginning strings in high school that when I did my master's thesis in commercial music I wrote a series of commercial-style string orchestra pieces designed especially for first-year high school players. I have incorporated an entire string section into our jazz band, creating a jazz/pop orchestra in the Nelson Riddle and Henry Mancini tradition. In the process, playing strings has become a very cool thing to do at our school. The jazz/pop orchestra is the most coveted performing group to get into. Beginning high school string players know they might get in within a year or two if they work hard and practice.

It is no secret that string programs often get less attention, less funding, and less appreciation than do marching bands, jazz bands, or concert bands. With help from experienced string players, a resurgence of strings in the schools can be brought about by non-string-playing music teachers.



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p.116

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 [Top of Page](#) 

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