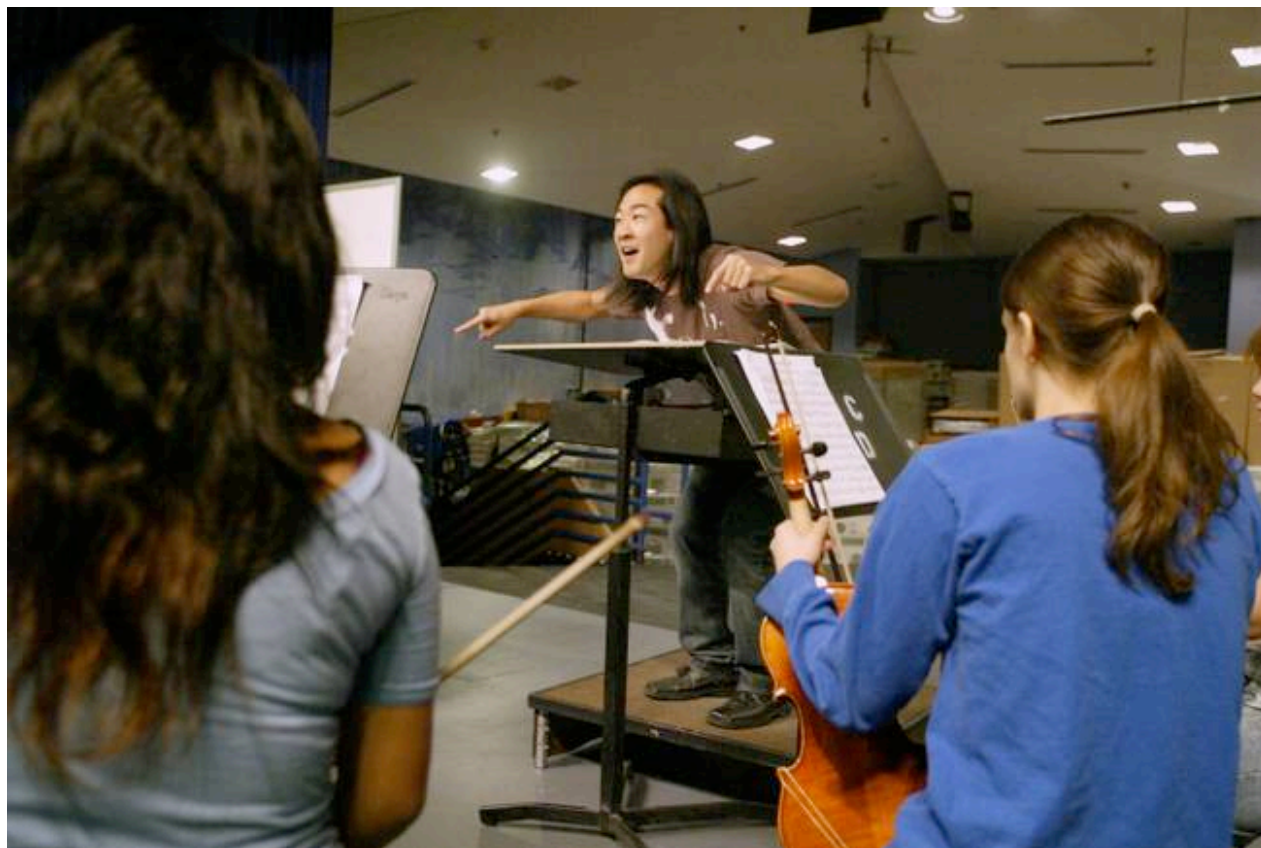


Las Vegas Sun

Striking a chord with students

Accomplished musician takes time out to inspire orchestra at Basic High



Sam Morris

Alpin Hong, the city of Henderson's artist in residence, assists in an orchestra rehearsal at Basic High School Wednesday, Sept. 16, 2009.

By [Emily Richmond \(contact\)](#)

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The visiting musician reaches down and plucks the violin and bow from the hands of a student, lifting the instrument to the cradle of his chin and shoulder.

He strokes full, rich notes that fill the orchestra room at [Basic High School](#).

"This is one person on one violin," concert pianist and guest instructor Alpin Hong says of himself, his voice rising above his own music. "Multiplied by all of you, you know you should be getting a bigger sound."

He hands back the violin, gives the count and the students, their brows furrowed with renewed effort, try again.

Despite Clark County School District's budget cuts — including \$120 million for the 2009-10 academic year — moments like this still happen.

Principals have some discretion in deciding which programs to cut and which to protect as the district reacts to

the [first drop in student enrollment in more than 25 years](#). And they are working hard to preserve the district's much-lauded music program.

Basic is expected to dodge any fine-arts cuts because it had no enrollment drop. Still, Principal David Bechtel says he's not satisfied with the status quo. Someday, he says, he hopes to add a mariachi class and a second band teacher.

Research has long shown that students who are involved in fine arts programs typically do better in their academic classes than their peers who don't take part.

"Those kids are traditionally our best students," Bechtel said. "We need to give more of them a chance to find something that offers them a creative outlet, a way to get involved."

And sometimes a guest performer can bring an extra spark into the rehearsal room.

So when city officials called Basic High School to relay Hong's interest in meeting with high school students before his performance at the Henderson Pavilion, Kelly Bryan, Basic's new orchestra teacher, jumped at the opportunity for her students to meet the well-known pianist. His appearance would help set the mood and the expectations for the year, Bryan thought.

And then there was even better news: Rather than staying for just the afternoon, Hong offered to help with her classes for an entire week, including preparing the orchestra for a Friday assembly performance.

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By the start of his third day, the students know Hong's expectations are high.

Bryan hands over conducting duties to Hong, picks up her own violin and takes a seat in the last row.

After successfully navigating the first tune — "Shenandoah" — the group struggles with "Cruella de Vil," from Disney's animated classic "101 Dalmatians."

Hong, 33, instructs the musicians to put down their bows and "sing" each bar of the piece. Again and again, he has them repeat back the notes of the melody and the refrain — first the violins, then the cellos, and finally the bass section.

"Dah da da da da, Dah da da da da ..."

Hong moves to the piano and begins to play, adding flourishes and runs as he sings along: "Cruella de Vil, Cruella de Vil ..."

Toes tap. Heads bob.

Satisfied that the students have caught both the swinging rhythm and jazzy emotion, he allows them to pick up their bows. And there's marked improvement.

"I don't want the tone to be any less full than that," Hong says. "I don't care if the notes are wrong, I don't want them to be any less confident than that."

For sophomore Caleb Stumbaugh, Hong's visit is both inspiring and energizing.

"We're putting so much more life into what we play," says Stumbaugh, who has played the cello for about five years. "I can hear it and feel it."

Students are well aware of the budget cuts, he says.

"If they took away sports and music, I would have no motivation to come to school," said Stumbaugh, who also plays volleyball and runs cross country for Basic. "This is my fun time."

For Hong, who spent his early childhood in an affluent Michigan suburb, piano lessons started at age 4 at the urging of his mother. He made his professional debut at age 10 with the Kalamazoo Symphony and later won numerous competitions.

When he was 12, his parents were killed in a car wreck. Hong and his younger brother were adopted by their aunt, who raised them in Southern California.

Hong studied medicine at UCLA, planning to follow in the footsteps of his late father, who had been a successful family psychiatrist. But after graduation Hong realized something was missing. He returned to music, earning his master's degree in piano performance from the Juilliard School in 2001. His Carnegie Hall debut followed the next year.

He now travels the globe giving about 30 concerts per year, and has visited 48 states (a concert in Hawaii in January will make it 49). At each stop, he tries to schedule a visit to a local school and opportunities to work with students.

As a result of those visits, he's seen firsthand the impact of the economic downturn on the nation's public schools, where many districts have cut and even abandoned fine arts instruction.

Losing his parents also meant letting go of what had been an idyllic childhood. And Hong was old enough to realize exactly what he had lost.

"I was a very angry kid," Hong says. "Things had fallen apart for me."

But music "became my saving grace," Hong said, helping him deal not only with his parents' deaths, but also with the normal turbulence of adolescence that followed.

"Even if I was short, skinny, with braces, whatever disastrous things happened to me socially, I felt like there was some core of self-confidence," Hong says. "No matter what, I was good at something."

And then there was the instant camaraderie that music education can create.

"If you're in a band or orchestra, you're never truly alone," Hong says. "The worst thing to be, at any age, is lonely."

There's no question Clark County's commitment to its fine arts program sets it apart from other districts, Hong says. And that's a commitment that will only benefit its students, and the community as a whole, in the long run.

"The reason students should learn music in school isn't to make them into musicians," Hong says. "It's to teach them to listen."

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