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After four decades, Mounds View music teacher officially a 'Master'

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Published:
Tuesday, October 27, 2009 5:05 PM CDT

ARDEN HILLS — A typical day for John Madura is not unlike a symphony: It's got a lot of parts, it's full of music, and boy, is it long.

"If I wasn't an early riser, I couldn't do this. I'm often in school by 5:30, six o'clock in the morning," said the Mounds View High School orchestra director, who was honored this month with a Master Teacher award from the Minnesota String & Orchestra Teachers Association.

Madura doesn't just put in long days — he's also put in a lot of them. This year, he marked his 40th anniversary leading the high school's orchestra program.

"In 1969, they needed an orchestra director and they also needed a diving coach," he said. "I fit the bill." He still coaches boys and girls diving after school for most of the year, which is why many of the 165 young musicians under him meet (once a week, in smaller groups) for rehearsal before the day begins.

He's been a musician since childhood, himself. "My mom was a viola and violin player, and my dad was a viola player. I just got involved wanting to play a string instrument," Madura said. "My mom, practical person that she is, said, 'Get your education degree, and if you want to perform, you can always do that, too.'" His own instrument of choice is the cello.

And after four decades, his enthusiasm for his art and his vocation, he said, hasn't waned.

"First of all, the orchestral music repertoire is just so fantastic," he said. "Being able to work with kids and introducing them to great music is probably the ultimate job. To get them to where they're listening to music and saying, 'We did that in orchestra!' — that's a real treat."

And while getting to that point has gotten easier, he said, it's still not necessarily easy, even after so long.

"Every year is the same, and every year is different. The challenge is finding the one, two, five pieces of music the kids are really going to latch on to, really going to like, and then just keeping the energy up every day," Madura said. "It's not exactly difficult, but it is a challenge."

What is a challenge, he said — and what's a big change over the years since he started — is working with students' calendars, which are often no less packed than his own.

"Kids have so many different opportunities now," he said, "and no real opportunities to just kind-of go off on their own. They're scheduled — it's huge. Now, an annual concert is scheduled a year in advance, and there are still conflicts."

One such annual concert is the orchestra's fundraiser event at Barnes & Noble on Nov. 3. Besides students performing ensemble pieces, there'll be a book fair hosted by the orchestra; a portion of sales will go to support the school program, and some of that money will help fund the orchestra's trip to Greece next March. The exciting part of that outing, he said, will be "just seeing what ancient history really is. We get used to thinking something is old if it's 20 years old, and there, there'll be music and performances from 1500 B.C."

Madura's own history revisited him this fall when he received the Master Teacher award, for which he

was nominated by a colleague: The president of the Minnesota String & Orchestra Teachers Association, which presented it to him, is a former student of his.

"It was an award that was long overdue," said Sarah Chelgren, now an orchestra director herself at Robbinsdale Cooper High in New Hope. "I think we all know that he has been a master teacher for a very long time. We were like, 'Oh. Well, of course. Why didn't he get this before?'"

It's not the first time Madura has seen a onetime protégé become a peer-although not all those occasions are so happy, he said.

"I liked this a lot better than when my divers become diving coaches and then compete against me," he said, laughing. "In music, it's not a competition."

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