THE JOY OF SONG

Handel and Haydn's pairing with Hub schools gives students a chance to lift their voices.

BY JAMES H. BURNETT III

Probably the worst kept secret in the classical music community is that it isn't very racially or socioeconomically diverse. And probably the most troubling note about music education in Boston and beyond is that an increasing number of public school districts are reducing or dropping their programs — if they ever had them in the first place.

Boston's Handel and Haydn Society, the period instrument chorus and orchestra that bills itself as "America's oldest continuously performing arts organization," decided last fall to tackle both issues in a new partnership with two city elementary schools.

The program pairs Handel and Haydn with the Joseph E. Lee K-8 School in Dorchester and the John F. Kennedy Elementary School in Jamaica Plain. Since September, at the Lee School, Handel and Haydn instructors known as "teaching artists" have been giving weekly school day voice and choral lessons to kindergarten and first-grade students. At the Kennedy School, the program has provided school day vocal and choral lessons to middle schoolers and after school lessons for elementary students.

"So many schools are struggling with academic budgets, and in that struggle arts programs are often short-changed or overlooked completely," says Bill Pappanastos, Handel and Haydn's assistant director of education. "Programs like this are important for us, so we can make sure the opportunity to learn music is there for diverse groups of kids and in communities where maybe these programs couldn't be afforded otherwise," he says. "And we know the parents and teachers at these schools feel just as strongly."

Anita Cooper, a parent who helped lead the charge to bring some kind of arts program to the Kennedy School, says she and other parents consider the partnership with Handel and Haydn to be a roaring success.

"By the numbers, 92 percent of our students are low income," Cooper says. "And we have a great deal of diversity, and frankly these children did not have the opportunity to learn music at school. The budget wasn't there. There are public schools or schools, period, that can go out and raise $35,000 in a school year to pay for such programs."

"We're not out of the relationship and Haydn, that their students and residents and we to know that," Cooper says. "We're glad,"

Cooper's Charlie, was interested in Jennifer Ash music education teaching art and music with her first. Now he comes school and to his 3-year "Jen's am she wins the these kids in backgrounds vocal music with literacy of Ash."

On a recent morning, as from the "So with an East strolled area classroom siren, gently by handing microphone they we along. Ash's aloud passing dren's books sing those as making sure face with our graduate of"
and after school lessons for elementary students.

"So many schools are struggling with academic budgets, and in that struggle arts programs are often short-changed or overlooked completely," says Bill Pappazisis, Handel and Haydn's assistant director of education. "Programs like this are important for us, so we can make sure the opportunity to learn music is there for diverse groups of kids and in communities where maybe these programs couldn't be afforded otherwise," he says. "And we know the parents and teachers at these schools feel just as strongly."

Anita Cooper, a parent who helped lead the charge to bring some kind of arts program to the Kennedy School, says she and other parents consider the partnership with Handel and Haydn to be a roaring success.

"By the numbers, 92 percent of our students are low income," Cooper says. "And we have a great deal of diversity, and frankly these children did not have the opportunity to learn music at school. The budget wasn't there. There are public schools or schools, period, that can go out and raise $35,000 in a school year to pay for such programs.

"We're not one of them... We weren't actively seeking a relationship with Handel and Haydn, but we found that their enthusiasm and their embrace of the students and willingness to get to know them was amazing. We're glad they're here."

Cooper's 6-year-old son, Charlie, was only marginally interested in music before Jennifer Ashe, a veteran music educator and staff teaching artist for Handel and Haydn, began working with his first-grade class.

Now he comes home from school and practices singing to his 3-year-old sister.

"Jen's amazing because she wins the kids over — all these kids from different backgrounds — by combining vocal music education with literacy," Cooper says of Ashe.

On a recent Tuesday morning, Ashe, like Maria from the "Sound of Music" with an East Coast accent, strolled around Charlie's classroom singing to children, gently coaxing them by handing the shier ones a microphone to at least pretend they were singing along. Ashe paused to read aloud passages from children's books and then to sing those same passages, making sure to get face to face with each student. A graduate of the New England Conservatory, she notes that Handel and Haydn's approach is different from what she has experienced in other music education programs: It's designed to let young children get comfortable with the music without pressuring them.

"It's amazing at this age, they all, regardless of where they're from or their family situation, appreciate two things — making new sounds and learning a fun story," she says. "And when you give them both together don't have to push them. They want more."

Ashe's Kennedy School students have been practicing that principle with the late Pete Seeger's "Abiyoyo," an old African griot-style folk tale set to music.

Soon, more children will be able to get in the act. With new grants from the Ramsey McCluskey Family Foundation and the Linde Family Foundation, Handel and Haydn will expand its school day choral lessons to include all second- and third-graders at both schools for three years.

James H. Burnett III is a Globe reporter. He can be reached at james.burnett@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter @JamesBurnett.

Jennifer Ashe says Handel and Haydn's approach is designed to let young children get comfortable with the music without pressuring them.