

Students and professional musicians celebrate Harlem Renaissance composer

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MIKE SCANLAN Students from St.

Benedict's Prep in Newark attend a workshop with pianist Jonathan Batiste, center, and trumpeter Michael Blutman, right, of the American Symphony Orchestra.

American Symphony Orchestra. *When and where:* 3 p.m. Sunday, Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Hall, 65th Street and Broadway, New York; 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Conlin Auditorium, St. Benedict's Preparatory School Auditorium, 520 Martin Luther King Blvd., Newark. *How much:* \$28-\$57 in New York; visit lincolncenter.org or call (212) 721-6500. Free in Newark; visit sbp.org or call (973) 792-5800.

A "crescendo of effort" is how teachers at St. Benedict's Preparatory School describe this week's culmination of the Newark institution's yearlong exploration of the Harlem Renaissance.

The New York-based American Symphony Orchestra has been working closely with St. Benedict's teachers and students in a humanities program that links music, literature, visual arts and journalism. Some 100 students will attend the ASO's Lincoln Center performance this Sunday for free, with the concert revolving around African-American composer William Grant Still. On Thursday, ASO players will perform alongside student musicians in a concert at the school.

The ASO was awarded a grant by the National Endowment for the Arts to create a multidisciplinary experience for a dozen New Jersey and New York schools as part of the orchestra's Music Notes program, which aims to expand the audience for classical music by underscoring its relationship to history, politics and the other arts. The St. Benedict's partnership was one of the most ambitious. It involved 300 of the school's 540 students over months of interaction with ASO musicians and yielded wide-ranging creative work that will be exhibited at the Manhattan and Newark concerts.

Along with leading tutorials for student instrumentalists, ASO players gave talks to broader groups of students about Still and how his music drew upon the 1920s world of black spirituals, jazz and blues. The music animated their investigation of the explosion in African-American creativity that was the Harlem Renaissance: Visual-arts students created murals, sculptures and prints influenced by the era, while technical drawing classes drafted renderings of Harlem architecture. Journalism students interviewed and photographed

the visiting musicians for print and broadcast pieces. English classes produced a literary magazine as a take-away at the concerts.

"When the boys know they're producing something for an audience, they are really inspired," says Pamela Wye-Hunsinger, chairman of the St. Benedict's arts department. Moreover, adds creative writing instructor David Wolf, the intensive contextual approach has been "such a rich learning experience for both teachers and students. It excites all of us."

Wye-Hunsinger sings the praises of the ASO's "lavish commitment," as more than 20 musicians have visited the school. Trumpeter Michael Blutman has been the lead presence, with a knack for relating to the kids.

"He took them seriously, so they took him seriously," says Wye-Hunsinger.

Clifford Brooks, the ASO's New Jersey-based education adviser for Music Notes, says "the orchestra's musicians love really sharing their knowledge and passion with teachers and students, rather than just coming in to perform and leave."

Sunday's Lincoln Center concert, conducted by ASO music director Leon Botstein (also president of Bard College), will include the tone poems "Darker America" and "Africa" by the Arkansas-born Still (1895-1978). Also featured will be Still's "Symphony No. 2" debuted by Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1937). Works by Still's teachers George Chadwick and Edgard Varese share the bill. The St. Benedict's program will include choral works by Still set to poems by fellow Harlem Renaissance artist Langston Hughes.

Wolf says a visit to Lincoln Center alone can be a precious experience for his students. "Many of these kids have never been to a concert in the city. It will enlarge their world in a way that can't be overestimated."

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