NISO CELEBRATES 30TH BIRTHDAY

The Northwest Iowa Symphony Orchestra (NISO), which has its home at Dordt College, turned 30 this year. Its success story is a testament to creative thinking, hard work, and a college-community partnership that has lasted for three decades.

"NISO may be one of the only orchestras of its kind," says General Manager and Music Professor Emerita Dr. Karen DeMol, who was principal clarinetist with NISO for 24 years. Two years ago NISO worked with a Dordt College marketing intern who conducted research to see if there were any comparable orchestras in the state that play great symphonic repertoire with members that include high school and college students, music teachers and professors, and professional musicians. He found none.

"NISO is a model for small communities," says its conductor Dr. Christopher Stanichar, who comes to Sioux Center from Sioux Falls, South Dakota, each week for rehearsals. In fact, he adds, it could be a model for community orchestras in larger cities as well. He says, "NISO may be the one of the finest orchestras for its size in the United States."

NISO is a community orchestra, but Dordt College has played a crucial role in its operation. The college quietly contributes rehearsal and performance space and administrative assistance. Dr. Bradley Miedema, Dordt's band and orchestra director and a member of the music faculty, is also NISO's music director. Miedema has deep roots in NISO, having played both violin and horn as a student. Today, as music director, he assists with auditions, choosing music, and finding guest artists. In 2007, he founded NISYO, the youth orchestra that grew out of NISO, and served as its director until last spring.

"NISYO gives students the experience they need to enter NISO, with added confidence and ensemble preparation," he says. NISYO is a good complement to local school programs, giving talented middle school and high school students an opportunity to play more challenging repertoire. The early preparation of some of its members has also allowed NISO to
play more difficult music.

Although NSO has its roots in local ad hoc string groups in Sioux County, it began officially at Sioux County Orchestra after Dr. Henry Duitman joined the music faculty at Dordt College in 1985. Duitman was convinced that students in the college chamber orchestra needed the challenge of playing in a fuller orchestra. He shared this vision with Dr. James Koldenhoven, who was then dean of the humanities division at Dordt. Within a year the college approved the arrangement envisioned by Duitman and Koldenhoven, allowing college students to split their rehearsal time between the chamber orchestra of Dordt College and the community orchestra, receiving one college credit for their work. In honor of his founding work, Duitman will return to guest conduct a major piece at the 30th anniversary concert in April. Duitman is currently director of orchestras at Grand Valley State University in Michigan.

"I knew from experiences when I was growing up that sitting next to a professional player or to your teacher in an orchestra is one of the most exceptional learning experiences possible," says Duitman.

With its history of strong strings education, Sioux Center has been the perfect place for NSO. Local music teachers are eager to play in an orchestra; parents of string students are happy to not have to drive 50 or 60 miles to have their children play in a youth orchestra; college string players gain a deeper musical background; and Sioux City and Sioux Falls professional musicians are close enough to participate. On top of that, the B.J. Haan Auditorium is a perfect performance space for large symphonic works.

symphony orchestra masterworks in live performance. The breaks during rehearsals (with the greatest cookies ever made by volunteers from the Friends of NSO) were times of wonderful discussions about music and music education among all the players.*

The two Dordt alumni who currently share the role of concertmaster were nurtured in that environment but say it was a sink-or-swim experience to play in the Sioux County Orchestra as junior high string players.

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-- Dr. Henry Duitman, NSO's founding conductor

"Looking back, I am overwhelmed by the camaraderie of the musicians," says Duitman. "Eighth graders, top high school and college students, music teachers, professors, and professional principal players all worked together with the common goal of learning and presenting to others the great gift of hearing.

"It was truly amazing how much I grew just from struggling to stay afloat!" says Lisa (Van Vuuren, '94) Miedema. "Soon I began to find myself getting more and more of the notes, learning more and more about music, musical terms, how to follow a conductor, and how to feel nuance as expertly modeled by the
professinals in the group." Miedema was an orchestra member throughout high school and college, and her name appears on the program of the first concert.

"You can truly amaze yourself with what you can accomplish when you push yourself to keep playing new and difficult music," says Jennifer (Vanden Hurk '01) Frems, who shares the role of concertmaster with Miedema. Like Miedema, Frems also plays in several regional orchestras and teaches from her studio. Both lived in other communities following college, but later returned to the area.

Today talented middle and high school students like Miedema and Frems get their start in NISO and develop the skills and expertise they need to play with a larger orchestra in a less "sink-or-swim" atmosphere.

"I tried to lead the orchestra in a way that would help students learn important concepts and background material," Bradley Miedema says. "It is remarkable to witness their growth. I've had a front row seat for seeing young musicians develop from week to week." Both NISO and the Dordt Chamber Orchestra have reaped the benefits of his youth orchestra work.

NISO BEGINNINGS AND TRADITIONS

Over the years, NISO has premiered three compositions. Co-concertmaster Jennifer Frems particularly remembers the premier performance of "Orchestrations" by Irene Eugen, a "children's musical," as an elementary school inspiration—especially going up to meet the soloists after the concert.

Dordt College Professor Emeritus Dr. James Koldenhoven played a big role in NISO's history. As dean of the humanities in 1986, he supported and helped make the dream of a community orchestra based at Dordt College a reality. He served as general manager for many years, resigned, and then came out of retirement to take up the reins once more during a period of transition in 2008. Koldenhoven finally retired for the last time in December 2015. He brought not only enthusiasm but also organizational skills, state arts organization involvement and experience, and fundraising experience to the organization.

Clarinetist Dr. Karen DeMol loves making great orchestral music and believes there are expressive capabilities in music that simply can't be communicated in words. Now general manager of NISO, her focus is helping the orchestra thrive administratively and financially.

NISO presents four concerts each season, one of them a pops concert and one a children's concert. The children's concert is a highlight for almost everyone involved with NISO. More than 1,000 middle school students come to the B. J. Haan Auditorium to listen attentively, enjoy the program, and learn about new music.

In celebration of its 30 years, NISO has put out a CD titled "Musical Gems," which features performances from past seasons of concerts. For more information about NISO or purchasing the CD, go to niso.dordt.edu.
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— Co-Concertmaster Lisa Miedema

Thirty years after its first concert, what still stands out about NISO is its commitment to educate young players.

"It's a brilliant model," says Stanichar, who notes that, in his experience, all-professional orchestras are often made up of "grumpy people" who grumble about the process or the music. Stanichar guest conducted for NISO in 2009 and was struck by the players' passion for making good music—the excitement and freshness of young, talented players; the commitment and enthusiasm of teaching principals; and the humble and joyful work ethic of all players. When later offered the position of conductor, he eagerly accepted.

"Many of those who play professionally in regional orchestras have told me that NISO is their favorite orchestra," Stanichar says. Last fall, Stanichar also took over as conductor for NISOY.

NISO, then SCO, held its first concert on November 12, 1986. Made up of 55 members, 12 of the players were Dordt College students. Last spring NISO was comprised of 74 players, 28 of them Dordt members. Over the years many Dordt College students have taken what they learned in NISO to new community orchestras.

DeMol says NISO has seen steady growth in quality and reputation, noting that early players likely would be surprised at the music played today as compared to that of the early years. She describes the repertoire as "doable but challenging, accessible—and so enjoyable." Even though she no longer plays clarinet in the orchestra, DeMol still tries to find time most days to practice. "Once you've worked hard to master difficult and beautiful music, you don't really want to let it go," she says, smiling.

"I have found NISO to be one of the gems out there. There is a genuine spirit of serious music-making within its mission to be a place for blossoming musicians to learn," says Co-Concertmaster Lisa Miedema. "We are truly blessed to have these orchestras in our community. You just don't see this kind of thing everywhere."

SALLY JONGSMA