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David Robertson revisits school that got him going in music

By Sarah Bryan Miller
POST-DISPATCH CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC
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LOS ANGELES — The last time he stood on the campus of Santa Monica High School, the year was 1976 and David Robertson was wearing a cap and gown.

On Wednesday morning, Robertson — now an internationally acclaimed conductor and music director of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra — went home.

He's a self-proclaimed product of the school district's legendary music program, which starts children on an instrument in third grade. He began playing trumpet, moved to French horn, spent a season with a tuba and attempted violin. Oh, and he sang, too, and played the singing, dancing, strutting, swindler-charmer Harold Hill in the school production of "The Music Man."

Robertson was invited by orchestra teacher Joni Swenson to conduct a master class with students in "Samohi's" top orchestra, one of six for a student population of just under 3,000. Newly returned from a trip to Carnegie Hall, they were working on a piece of music beyond the reach of most high school ensembles: Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 4.

The campus is large, spread out on 33 acres and surrounded by a high security fence. When Robertson arrived, the student orchestra was already practicing. After being formally introduced, Robertson established himself with the kids: telling about the time he cracked his head on the old sound-deflecting walls while entering the stage, and how there was, somewhere in the music department files, a photo of him wearing a band shako and a faceful of zits like a lunar landscape.

Robertson, who also has visited several schools in St. Louis, illustrated his gift for entertaining while teaching — and getting the sound he's after — using funny voices and accessible analogies. There was a Russian accent to channel Tchaikovsky, and an illustration of how Danes "swallow their language" to show how paired notes in a passage should be treated: the first one emphasized, the other dropped.

The kids were focused on the conductor, laughed genuinely at his jokes and played better from the first measures. After working over a movement of the Tchaikovsky, they whipped through the sprightly overture to Leonard Bernstein's "Candide."

After the rehearsal portion of the master class ended, Robertson took questions from the students. What made him want to conduct? one student asked. After a home burglary when he was 10 that cost him his shiny new trumpet, he realized that "if I became a conductor, no one could steal my instrument," he answered.

School officials and photographers hovered throughout the 90-minute session. Los Angeles Times columnist Steve Lopez — author of "The Soloist" — was there, working on a piece about state budget cuts that would hurt school arts programs and undermine the program that made Robertson into a musician.

The Legislature appreciates local boys made good, though: The district superintendent, Tim Cuneo, stepped up to present Robertson with a certificate of recognition from Santa Monica's assemblywoman. Robertson had a hard time getting away for a luncheon buffet set up by a team of orchestra mothers.

"I'm just tickled that he came," Swenson, the orchestra teacher, said later.

Swenson, some of her students and their parents attended the SLSO's concert that night at Walt Disney Concert Hall. The experience "was even more than I'd hoped," she said. "Hebrought a fresh, new approach to the music, and I learned as much as the students did. We are still glowing after his visit."