



Fairfield High School conductor James Ledbetter, and student musicians Maria Nguyen and Samantha Coning talk in the pit before a recent performance of “Fiddler on the Roof.”

The **Pit** Where the pulse of FHS musicals can be found



*Story by Zoie Lambert
Photos by Zoie Lambert and
instructor Mark Braam*

Tribal Tribune staff

The recent Fairfield High School musical “Fiddler on the Roof” revolved around themes of family, love, and acceptance ... and these lessons were all encapsulated in the music of the play. From the title fiddler (played by violinist Samantha Coning) who

plucked the first and last notes of the play, to the literally out-of-sight pit orchestra, the music can be characterized as the heartbeat – strong yet, invisible – pushing the plot and characters to the ears of the masses. To get to know and understand how a pit orchestra lives and breathes, I interviewed James Ledbetter, orchestra teacher at Fairfield Freshman and Senior High schools.

Communication

Although music is the pulse of many musicals, the dramatics and music are really co-dependent. This dynamic of the music and the performers requires much fine-tuning. Says Ledbetter: “Weeks before (the orchestra and the actors) come here (into the actual Performing Arts Center’s stage and pit), we have rehearsals together where we talk through the music; it’s a balancing act – sometimes they are following me and there are other times where they

are giving me the cue and I’m following them.”

Occasionally he has to communicate with them one-on-one

to demonstrate how different elements should be sung: “This should be faster, this should be slower, this should be more sentimental.”

That communication between orchestra and singers translated over to communicating between the cast and the audience. For example, it was clear – as an audience member experiencing the troubles in the tiny fictional Jewish village of Anatevka, Russia – that the piece,

“Sabbath Prayer” expressed the ethos of that era, while “The Dream” sequence disclosed the fears of Tevye in a comical fashion.

As a result of the music distinguishing the high and lows of the plot, the audience felt that they



Fairfield High School orchestra teacher James Ledbetter conducts the pit orchestra during the final dress rehearsal for "Fiddler on the Roof."

were a part of that village awaiting the matchmaker's results.

What is 'The Pit?'

A literal pit is an “excavated hole or cavity in the ground” (definition courtesy of Google), while a figurative pit can be a never-ending hole, a darkness engulfing a person's happiness. Even though.

Ledbetter jokingly refers to the pit orchestra as the “pit of despair,” the pit at Fairfield is nothing less than the literal definition. It is, quite frankly, a deep hole placed directly in front of the stage and hidden from view from the audience, from where music almost magically appears to provide life to the plays.

The students, according to Ledbetter, really transform the figurative connotation of the word pit with their interpretations of the music, of course, but also with “the inside jokes we have in the music, (plus) wearing glow sticks on our heads ... just the goofy stuff.” Ledbetter added, “It gets a little dry down here, so the Christmas lights in the trumpets, glow sticks, cookies (all help) to keep the energy high.”



Electric bass player Mae Porter helps drive the pulse of the pit orchestra.

Matching Music to the Mood

The audience during the run of “Fiddler on the Roof” was able to identify strongly with the story line. Tevye – the main character – has difficulty marrying off his three eldest daughters ... a universal theme that can be found in America as well as in Russia, right? But the music? Not completely universal.

Did you know that most American – Western style – music is played in major keys? But listening to the music of “Fiddler,” it seemed the music had a sharp, high pitch, and, to my ears, it seemed contrary to the lightness and fluidity of American music. Ledbetter explained, saying that the music is more of a Russian-Jewish style, “more of a Klezmer” with a “particular tonality” apart from

a Western style with a “harmonic minor scale that sounds so unique.”

Knowing this, now I understood how the music could figuratively transport the audience from a Fairfield auditorium to a

Jewish village in Russia and compel them to become a part of this journey with Tevye’s family. The dances and clothes now made sense, because the music was the context needed to understand the whole play.

Moreover, just to make sure of this magical transporting would happen and that the orchestra would play the music precisely as needed, they had a 30-minute warmup, Ledbetter said, “To get everyone focused and in-sync.” They went through a variety of music in the play – waltz style, a fast two-beat – so that when they got to show time, they were ready. Staying true to the historical intentions of the music allowed the orchestra to become the heartbeat of the play, and the performers were the blood rushing through their valves.



The pit orchestra sits in the dark in the deep hole fronting the stage, their music lit primarily by stand lights and trumpet section Christmas lights.

“Fiddler on the Roof” was Ledbetter’s first musical, coming in his first year at FHS. He said that, “The musical is very important for this reason – it is the one thing that we do in the (fine arts) department that involves everyone: the wind players from band, the string players from orchestra, the singers from choir, plus dancers and actors. Every department of fine arts is in this one thing.”

The musicals allow the fine arts department to represent itself in the best way possible and, after experiencing “Fiddler on the Roof,” it is safe to say that the pit orchestra provides the pulse that allows the musicals at Fairfield High School to live and thrive.

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