

Music makers: Berkeley students build instruments

Jill Tucker

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Berkeley fourth-grader Ronan Kelley ran his fingers along the side of his wooden musical instrument feeling for rough edges he still needed to smooth with sandpaper.

It's an odd instrument - two small pizza-size boxes connected by a long, skinny neck - a product of his 9-year-old imagination and some help from a hammer and a jigsaw.

Ronan didn't know what he'd call it.

"Once I have heard what it sounds like, I can sort of take that into account," said the Berkeley School student.

While music [education](#) in many schools - if it exists at all - is limited to flutes, violins, clarinets and the occasional trumpet, at the East Bay independent school it is not so traditional. Music flows out of the minds of the students there and into instruments they've crafted themselves. Their guide is internationally renowned composer and musical instrument creator Paul Dresher.

In the school's woodworking room, toots, twangs, thwumps, bings and plinks are accompanied by saws and hammers as students build modified violins that look like big wooden bones.

Whatever it was, 10-year-old Dominik Nettesheim was making one on a recent morning.

"I'm making, um, it's kind of hard to explain," Dominik said. "It's kind of like a guitar."

But instead of moving his fingers across the neck, the fifth-grader said the neck on his instrument was built to slide back and forth under three strings.

Dresher, a highly regarded innovative artist known for being irreverent, loved Dominik's one-of-a-kind instrument.

Dresher, who works with his longtime collaborator Daniel Schmidt, a Berkeley School teacher, said the nine-week course in instrument building is meant to help children learn the physics and mechanisms of sound - how sound is made or manipulated.

But for the composer, who dropped out of Advanced Placement math in high school to take wood shop, there was a lot more to it than music.

"Everything has gone toward digital technology," he said. Kids are expected to interact with a screen.

Making music, literally making it out of a block of wood, is perhaps the key to a child finding his way in this world, Dresher said.

"There are people who don't express themselves or find their true metier in life in academic classes," he said. "Those people have very few opportunities to discover that nowadays."

It's a little easier at private schools, where money isn't always as tight and parents often demand a well-rounded and free-thinking academic experience, he said.

This from a man who invented the quadrachord, a 15-foot-long instrument with four 14-foot strings that can be played like a guitar, cello or percussion instrument.

Music, in short, doesn't have to involve just a trombone, tuba, violin, mandolin, piano, flute or fife.

It can be whatever 10-year-old Imogen Ross cradled in her arms, a "guitarish thing" that she couldn't wait to take home and show her family.

She wasn't sure what she would make next.

Schmidt smiled.

"The sky's the limit now," he told her.

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2012/03/08/BA1Q1NFBC0.DTL>

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