DECEMBER 2026

Notes From MountainTop Strings

Celebrating 15 Years with MountainTop Strings!



2026 - 2027 MountainTop Strings of California

Front Row (L to R): Kinsey Martin, Ryan Chung, Rose Espinosa, Angie Chung, Hallie Joy Thomas, Nina Cantu-Wang, Cathrine Horner, Sharon Rizzo (Music Director), Oliver Mendez; Back Row (L to R): Mark Horner, Michael Espinosa, James Phillips, Jesse Coster, Josh Cantu-Wang, Adam Merrall; Not Shown in Photo: Oryan Knisley, Katelynn Azevedo (MTS Assistant)

After 15 years, we are proud that MountainTop Strings continues to stay busy sharing the joy of music throughout our mountain communities and beyond! From local festivals and fundraisers to weddings and special community celebrations, our musicians have been bringing music to a wide variety of events and connecting with the people and organizations that make our community so special. With more performances coming this December and exciting concerts on the horizon for spring 2027, the music never stops! We are incredibly grateful to our talented students, dedicated families, and wonderful community partners for making every performance possible. Thank you for continuing to make MTS part of your celebrations! Happy Holidays!

Sharon Rizzo, Music Director,
MountainTop Strings of California

Recent Community Outreach Performances



Students Raising Money for Italy!
Sonora Cantina, Big Bear Lake



Plein Aire Arts Festival Awards Ceremony
Destination Big Bear



Sports Hall of Fame
Big Bear Lake





Arrowhead Arts Gala
Lake Arrowhead



MountainTop Strings Concert
Our Lady of the Lake Church



Annual Lighthouse Fundraiser
Sessions; Big Bear Lake

Recent Community Outreach Performances (Cont.)



"Wings Over Big Bear"
Community Memorial for Jackie our Beloved Eagle
Bear Mountain; Big Bear Lake

We've been rather busy since returning from Italy - here's a list of our Fall Community Performances!

- August
  - Classics By the Lake - Lake Arrowhead
- September
  - Fall Festival - Opening Performance for Arrowhead Arts Symphony
  - Sports Hall of Fame - Destination Big Bear
  - Wedding Ceremony - Our Lady of the Lake Church
  - Home Tour - Lake Arrowhead
- October
  - "Wings Over Big Bear" Featured Ensemble - Bear Mountain
  - Arrowhead Arts Annual Gala - UCLA - Lake Arrowhead Lodge
  - Plein Aire Arts Festival - Destination Big Bear
  - Annual Lighthouse Fundraiser - Sessions, Big Bear
- December
  - Lake Arrowhead Resort for Mountains Community Hospital
  - Strings & Jingles Big Bear Concert - Performing Arts Center
  - Frosty Fiddles Concert - Lake Arrowhead
  - Festive Dinner & Music OCI - Big Bear Lake

Stay tuned for 2027 events! For updates, visit mountaintopstrings.org

Related Strings Programs

Bear Valley USD Elementary & Middle School Strings

The Bear Valley Unified School District Strings Program introduces 4th and 5th graders at North Shore and Baldwin Lane Elementary Schools to the joy of playing string instruments, with opportunities to continue at Big Bear Middle School. Students receive a free instrument loan for the school year and learn everything from the basics of playing and reading music to performing in an orchestra. Through concerts and collaborative learning, the program builds musical skills, confidence, and teamwork while creating a foundation for future musicians in the Big Bear community.



Lighthouse Youth Orchestras



The Lighthouse Youth Orchestras offer young musicians opportunities to grow through Sinfonia, for grades 5–7, Chamber Strings, for approved students in grades 7–12, and Young Artists' Ensemble, which is by audition. From their first full orchestral experience to more advanced ensemble playing, students build musical skills, confidence, and teamwork while exploring a variety of musical styles. Through mentorship, adjudication festivals, and community performances, these programs nurture the next generation of musicians and prepare students for advanced opportunities with MountainTop Strings. We are thrilled to have our very own alumna, Katelynn Azevedo, as the instructor for the Sinfonia ensemble this year.

Arrowhead Arts Youth String Enembles

The Arrowhead Arts Youth String Ensembles offer a tiered strings program where students can begin learning an instrument in 4th grade and advance to after-school programs, Prelude Strings and Intermezzo, taught by Arrowhead Arts instructor Mui-Yee Barry. From there, students may audition for Chamber Strings and the Young Artists' Ensemble, taught by Sharon Rizzo, where they can further develop their musicianship and pursue advanced opportunities, including participation in MountainTop Strings.



2026 Summer Italy Concert Tour

Our 2026 Italy Tour was one of the most extraordinary journeys in MountainTop Strings history! With musicians ranging from just 13 to 18 years old, this exceptionally young and talented group rose to the challenge of a 21-day tour featuring 13 concerts across Italy. With nearly 50 pieces prepared to perfection, our students performed an impressive range of music, such as Baroque works like Vivaldi's Four Seasons, to Sacred Hymns, Jazz, and Rock. Audiences welcomed us into magnificent basilicas, historic churches, charming villages, and bustling festival venues - even in towns where very little English was spoken. Among the highlights were two performances in Leonardo da Vinci's hometown of Vinci, including the church where he was baptized; our third invitation to the Cremona Summer Festival; a concert in Venice's historic Chiesa della Pietà, Vivaldi's church; and our first performances in Parma and the beautiful Baptistry of Cremona. The students also explored Italy beyond the concert hall, biking past Rome's iconic landmarks, touring a historic pasta factory in Lari, and climbing the domes of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome and Brunelleschi's Dome in Florence. For many, it was their first time traveling abroad, yet they performed with remarkable artistry, maturity, and professionalism. I could not be more proud of these young musicians, who proved that age is no measure of talent or achievement. My heartfelt thanks to everyone who helped make this unforgettable journey possible! — Sharon Rizzo, MTSC Music Director



Sharon Rizzo
Director



Basilica San Marco, Venice



One of our many late night Concerts in Tuscany, Castello dei Vicari, Lari

A Few Memories From Our Musicians

"The 2026 Italy tour was an unforgettable three weeks for me. I grew so much as a musician and made so many memories that I will always cherish. My favorite concert was at the Basilica dei Santi XII Apostoli in Rome. One of my biggest highlights was watching a live opera performance that ended with all four movements of Vivaldi's The Four Seasons, and then getting to perform in Vivaldi's church the next day! I loved being able to perform with such a talented ensemble and being surrounded by people who share my love for music." — Hallie Joy Thomas

"The 2026 Italy Tour was unforgettable! I got to play music in Italy with my friends and was cheered on by audiences from all over the world. Not everyone can say that. I will always cherish the fond memories I made and shared with my friends during this tour. My favorite concert was the one we played at Parco Aquaria in Vinci [where Leonardo played in the woods as a child] for the local community. People were super friendly, and they really enjoyed our performance. Some of them even danced to our music. I felt I made connections with them even though we don't speak the same language. Or perhaps I should say, music is the universal language! I want to thank our amazing music director, Mrs. Rizzo, for making this happen, and I look forward to the next Italy tour with her!" - Josh Cantu-Wang





Bike Tour Around Rome (Left) Italian Cooking Classes (Right)

"The 2026 Italy tour was one of the most amazing experiences of my entire life. As someone who wants to work in music, it was a real insight into the world of professional performing and preparation. Working as a soloist and concertmaster for the tour forced me to grow and improve in a way I don't think I would have if not for the tour. I would say my favorite city was Montecatini, I liked it because it felt more casual compared to cities like Rome, of course it's important to experience cities like Rome; however the calmness of a city like Montecatini is so soothing; also there was a really good Ramen place I went to 3 nights in a row. My favorite concert was playing in Vivaldi's church in Venice, it was such an extraordinary feeling to play his piece in his church. I would like to give a huge thank you to Sharon Rizzo and the MountainTop Strings of California for the opportunity." - James Phillips

Italy 2026 Continued





A trip to the Colosseum and the Spanish Steps in Rome

"The 2026 Italy tour was an amazing three week opportunity. I got to experience many new things and was able to see a whole new culture. One of my favorite concerts was in Sant'Ermo because there were so many people, that the crowd was overflowing outside of the church. After the concert a lot of the people from the town were giving us compliments and it felt great. Overall, this trip was the best trip that I have ever been on and I want to thank everybody that helped to make this trip possible and allowed me go on this trip, especially our director Sharon Rizzo." -Oliver Mendez

Senior Spotlight - Mark Horner

Mark Horner, our graduating senior, began playing violin in 5th grade at Big Bear Elementary School. Moving up through all levels of the program, he has participated in two tours to Italy. He especially enjoyed Rome for its rich history and was excited to return on our tour in 2026. Currently on track to be the sole valedictorian of Big Bear High School, he has also participated in Cross Country for three years and Distance Track for four years. Mark has been known to run 12 miles and then head straight to a four-and-a-half-hour MTS rehearsal! In addition, Mark serves his church congregation at The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and plans to serve a two-year mission following high school graduation. Mark always enjoys a musical challenge and often takes it upon himself to learn additional, particularly challenging pieces. Way to go, Mark! We are all so proud of you!



Mark hanging out in
Saint Mark's Square, Venice

Come Join Us at OCI for the 3rd Annual Festive Dinner & Music!

Wednesday, December 23rd • 5:30 pm

Old Country Inn • 41126 Big Bear Blvd, Big Bear Lake

Seating is Limited, Advanced Purchase Recommended • Tickets at MountainTopStrings.org

Thank You To Our Sponsors

As always, we are grateful to all of our donors, without whom we could not do all the wonderful things we do and bring music and joy to so many, as well as help young people grow through the experience of music!

Hire a Group

Hire a group for your next event! MTSC players perform for weddings, engagement proposals, birthdays, and memorials. For more details, reach out to Sharon Rizzo at Srizzo.mtsc@gmail.com.

MountainTop Strings is a 501(c)3 Nonprofit under The Lighthouse Project: Tax ID 26-1477846
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