

December 2025

Notes From MountainTop Strings

Celebrating Another Successful Season with MountainTop Strings!

After 25 wonderful years of teaching strings in our mountain communities, our programs continue to reach new heights! From Bear Valley Elementary Strings to Big Bear Middle School Strings, Lighthouse Youth Orchestras, Arrowhead Arts Youth Strings Ensembles, and finally MountainTop Strings nearly 160 young musicians are now part of this thriving program. Each year brings fresh faces, new talent, and inspiring dedication. Our students continue to shine both on and off the stage, balancing academics, athletics, and other commitments while excelling in their musicianship and artistry. Mrs. Rizzo could not be more proud of their achievements, from incredible performances throughout the year to the exciting anticipation of the MTS Italy Tour in 2026! Read on to celebrate the milestones and memories that make this musical journey so special.

It's not just about the final performance, it's the heart, effort, and passion that each student brings to every rehearsal that truly sets them apart. Thank you for your continued support and for being part of our MountainTop Strings family. Wishing you and your loved ones a joyful and music-filled season!



Sharon Rizzo, Music Director,
MountainTop Strings of California



Bear Valley Unified School District Strings Programs Reach Record Numbers



Elementary Strings Program

The Bear Valley Unified School District continues its incredible commitment to music education by funding strings programs at North Shore Elementary, Baldwin Lane Elementary, and Big Bear Middle School. The Elementary program is open to all 4th and 5th graders. They have the option of continuing in the BBMS string orchestra. All BVUSD programs offer each student a free instrument on loan for the school year, giving them a hands-on introduction to the world of string playing.

This year, the elementary program has hit a record number of 110 stringers! During their first year, students learn the fundamentals: how to hold their instruments, create sound, and begin reading music. In their second year, they advance into more challenging repertoire, building confidence and skill along the way.

Many of these budding musicians continue their journey in the Big Bear Middle School elective strings program, where they dive deeper into music theory, history, and advanced repertoire. From there, students often progress into the Lighthouse Youth Orchestra and MountainTop Strings, with some even performing internationally or pursuing music careers as performers and educators.

Elementary and middle school string students perform twice a year at the Big Bear Lake Performing Arts Center, taking the stage in December and May. For many, these concerts are their very first experiences performing before a large audience, moments that build discipline, teamwork, and pride.

Every student who advances through our higher-level strings programs began with that first spark right here in the BVUSD Elementary Strings Program.



Students Practicing at Big Bear Middle School

Lighthouse Youth Orchestra Program

Sinfonia



Sinfonia
Led by Grace Chung

As students advance, many find their next step in Sinfonia, part of the Lighthouse Youth Orchestra after-school program. This tuition-based ensemble rehearses outside of school hours and offers young musicians in grades 5–7 their first full orchestral experience. Sinfonia is one of three string ensembles within the Lighthouse Youth Orchestra, all of which participate each spring in an adjudication festival judged by university faculty members. Each year, these ensembles consistently earn Gold Ratings, scoring 90 or above, for their exceptional performances and musicianship.

This year, Mrs. Rizzo invited Grace Chung, a senior, to direct the Sinfonia, which provides a supportive and inspiring environment where young musicians grow in skill and confidence. Grace's journey is an example of what dedication and mentorship can achieve, from her beginnings in this very program to becoming Concertmaster of the Young Artists Ensemble and performing as a featured soloist on international tours to Italy.

Now, Grace is giving back by guiding the next generation of musicians. Sinfonia is more than just a youth orchestra, it's a community built on mentorship, music, and the joy of shared achievement.

Chamber Strings

For students ready to take their musicianship to the next level, Chamber Strings offers a dynamic and rewarding challenge. This ensemble welcomes approved students in grades 7–12 who are eager to expand their skills and explore a wide variety of musical styles. Here, the music becomes more sophisticated, and the expectations are higher. Chamber Strings musicians study and perform a mix of genres from Classical and Jazz to Latin, Irish, and even Rock while learning how to adapt their playing to different rhythms, techniques, and ensemble settings.

Unlike a classroom setting, students rehearse and perform in smaller groups, gaining confidence as independent musicians and collaborators. This experience prepares them to perform at community events and sets the foundation for success in the most advanced MTS program.



Chamber Strings

Young Artists' Ensemble



The Young Artists' Ensemble (YAE) is the premier, semi-professional level of the Lighthouse Youth Orchestra program. Admission is by audition, for both new and returning students who demonstrate advanced skill, dedication, and musical maturity.

YAE members can range from grades 7–12, and are required to take private lessons and continue participating in Chamber Strings for two years after YAE acceptance to further refine their artistry.

These students perform complex works spanning Baroque, Classical, Jazz, and more at community events, weddings, and special performances. The most accomplished of these musicians have opportunities to perform solos of the great Baroque composers: Vivaldi, Bach and Telemann. With a repertoire of over 50 pieces, YAE musicians perform independently and with confidence, embodying the discipline and excellence that define MountainTop Strings. Participation in YAE also prepares students for opportunities to tour and perform internationally with MountainTop Strings.

Performance Highlights of the Past 9 Months



"Backyard Benefit" - Chirp Nature Center



"An Afternoon of Chamber Music" on the new stage in Hofert Hall at the PAC!



"International Make Music Day" - Big Bear Lake Village



"Tacos & Tunes" - Sonora Cantina



"Concert at the Captain's" - Captain's Anchorage



"Classics by Lake" - Lake Arrowhead



"Plein Aire Arts Festival" - Boulder Bay Park



"Starry, Starry Night" - Doves Annual Fundraiser

Arrowhead Arts Youth String Ensembles



Arrowhead Arts Chamber Strings
& Young Artist Ensemble

For nearly 15 years, Ms. Sharon Rizzo has worked with the Arrowhead Arts Association to build a thriving strings program. Funded by the Arrowhead Arts Association and open to students grades 4–12, the program offers a range of string instruction, from beginning to advanced. Ms. Rizzo now leads the upper-levels, while Mui-Yee Barry teaches the premier levels. The ensembles have several concerts each year, showcasing their skills and musicianship. Many participants have gone on to join the MountainTop Strings Italy Tour and even pursue careers as professional musicians and educators. This long-standing program continues to inspire young artists and strengthen the musical connection in our mountain communities.

Grace & Gracie Graduating Seniors

We are thrilled to celebrate Grace Chung and Gracie Dorantes-Lopez, who began their musical journey in the elementary strings program and have grown into accomplished musicians. Both have performed on Italy concert tours, with Gracie set to join the 2026 tour. We honor their 10 years of talent, dedication, and leadership within the MountainTop Strings program. Grace plans to pursue a bachelors in biology and go to medical school. Gracie plans to major in economics followed by law school. Mrs. Rizzo thanks them for their incredible contributions and wishes them the best in their future endeavors.



Italy Tour 2026 Well Under Way



2026 Italy Touring Orchestra

Since 2011, MountainTop Strings has been providing opportunities for our musicians to perform abroad. This June 16–July 5, 2026, we will be taking 15 string players on a 20-day, 10-concert tour to Italy. To prepare, there is a 15 month preparation and rehearsal program, refining repertoire across multiple genres. The tour will include performances in Rome, Vinci (Leonardo da Vinci's hometown), Tuscany, Siena, Cremona (the city of violin making), and Venice, with concerts in piazzas, basilicas, and other historic venues. The grand finale will feature an all-Vivaldi concert, celebrating the genius of the composer of The Four Seasons. This trip provides players with a professional-level experience that builds their artistry and personal growth. Beyond the music, the students will engage in educational tours of historic monuments, gaining cultural and historical insight along the way. The 2026 Italy Tour promises to be an unforgettable experience, showcasing the talents and achievements of our remarkable young musicians!

Come Join Us For a Festive Dinner & Music!
Saturday, December 20th • 5:30 pm

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

Reservations Required • Tickets at MountainTopStrings.org

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For Tickets



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!



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