

*****THE JTHS ORCHESTRA*****

Records show evidence of a student orchestra as early as 1905. The picture of the '05 orchestra first appears in the Class of 1906 yearbook and again in the golden anniversary yearbook of the Class of 1951. In the '06 yearbook, it states that the orchestra made its debut in November of '05 for the production of "Snowball" and identifies the "paid" orchestra director as William A. Heinze.

It is also said that a high school orchestra performed at the new township high school's dedication ceremonies in 1901 thereby giving the orchestra the proud distinction of being the oldest organization at JTHS. There is not much written documentation about this first orchestra. However, speculation is that this orchestra was directed by James Milton Thompson, a music instructor at the combined Joliet schools and at the Joliet Conservatory of Music.

Mr. Hiram A. Converse began his direction of the JTHS Orchestra in 1912 according to the 1912 yearbook. Fifteen musicians made up the organization: eight violins, two cornets, a flute, a clarinet, drums, a piano, and a string bass player. Rehearsals were held three times per week in a variety of locations including the "old" auditorium (which is now the present band/orchestra room,) classroom 229, the school's greenhouse or St. John's Lutheran Church (the former Little Theater building.)

Converse was not a full time director until 1925 at which time an orchestra room was equipped with an acoustically treated ceiling and lockers that are still in use. He entered the orchestra in its first state competition in 1927 at the Illinois State Normal University and won first place. In 1931, in Springfield, the orchestra won the state championship for the third consecutive time and was permanently awarded a very impressive silver and bronze trophy. This trophy may be seen in the trophy cases outside the main office. The orchestra also won high honors in 1932, 1933, and 1934. By 1942, the orchestra had been national champions seven times.

Following 35 years of service to the Joliet Township High School Orchestra, Converse retired. A spring concert was held on March 19, 1948, which was his final public appearance as the JT director.

Mr. Peter Labella, Jr. was named the orchestra director in the fall of 1948. He was a graduate of the Eastman School of Music. Under Mr. Labella's leadership, the JT orchestra received superior ratings in all contests entered during the years 1949, 1953, 1955, 1956, 1957, 1958, 1959, and 1961.

In 1957, the JT orchestra was the only group of musicians to receive the Superior or Division I award at the state contest. In 1965, both the East and West campuses opened and Peter Labella assumed the directorial duties at all three campuses. Mr. Labella retired in May of 1980. Mr. Dean Sayles was the director beginning in the fall of '83. Julie Ashcraft Verchimak took over as director from 1990-1994. Kevin Carroll, the former West band director, took the helm from 1995-2000.

In 2000, the district hired Mrs. Pamela (Burd) Breuning ('70 West) as the fulltime director and the orchestra continued winning accolades and competitions. Breuning retired in 2007.

In 2007, Mr. Peter Lipari was named director of the award-winning JTHS orchestra. A leader of passion, initiative, and vision, Maestro Lipari has directed orchestra, choral, opera and musical theater groups throughout the country and internationally including Chicago's Grant Park Orchestra, St. Louis Symphony, Ohio Light Opera, London Mozart Players of England, and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra in Australia to name just a few.

The JTHS orchestra under his direction has three distinct orchestras: the JTHS Strings, the Philharmonia, and the Symphony Orchestra. The one common thread connecting these three orchestra groups is the musicians, their excellent performances and their commitment. The parents of these musicians describe the orchestra as 180 hardworking and dedicated musicians.

Director Lipari travels from Joliet West to Joliet Central Monday through Friday teaching his orchestra students and preparing them for concerts and competition. Since becoming director, he has taken his musicians on tour to New York City; Dallas, Texas; Boston, Massachusetts, and to both Nashville and Memphis, Tennessee.