

About Jim Palmer...

Recipient of the American String Teachers Association Elizabeth A. H. Green Award for a distinguished career in string teaching, Jim Palmer retired in 2026 after 37 years of teaching high school orchestra in both Georgia and Florida. He was also a long-time Senior Conductor at the Florida State University Summer Music Camp. He continues to serve as the Music Director of the Youth Orchestra of Greater Columbus (Columbus, GA), a post he has held since 2002. An accomplished composer and arranger, Mr. Palmer has published numerous works for string orchestra and co-authored The Sound Orchestra method book. His works are frequently performed at ASTA and The Midwest Clinic and appear on state repertoire lists across the country.

A three-time Teacher of the Year, he has been inducted into the Florida Collegiate Music Educators Hall of Fame and is a frequent clinician for All-State and Honors Orchestras nationwide. He is a graduate of Florida State University and resides in Kennesaw, GA, with his wife, Lydia, and son, Curtis.

The Interview

Tell us how you became a music educator.

When I graduated from High School, I received a full music scholarship from Florida State University. Both of my parents were educators, but they still struggled financially and could not afford to send me to college. FSU's scholarship gave me that chance. My parents insisted that I major in Music Education, but I was extremely passionate about performance and focused heavily on becoming the best violist possible. My sophomore year, I had the opportunity to work with the Tallahassee Youth Orchestra as an assistant. That experience taught me the value of Music Education and gave me a deep desire to teach and motivate the next generation of musicians. My priorities shifted...a little. I decided that to become the best teacher possible, I still needed to become the best player possible so I could model for my students. From that point on, I could hardly wait to be a Music Educator.

What is some advice you'd give younger educators who are just entering the profession?

The best advice I can give young Music Educators is to be passionate about learning your ENTIRE career! Lean on the shoulders of the veterans and attend EVERY music conference possible! The better you are as a teacher, the better your students will perform. I'm still learning how to be a better teacher!

What are some creative ways you engaged your classes as a high school orchestra teacher? Student engagement is the key to the success of any music classroom. I learned that effective teaching begins with solid procedures. However, a master teacher also keeps their students on their toes wondering what's next! I loved catching my students off guard by mixing up the ensemble, turning the chairs backwards (Inside Out) and I had a strong emphasis in small groups. Being on a block schedule, I had time for small groups every week. The students performed for the class in small groups regularly. Holding those performances to high standards kept the students engaged every day.

What are your preferred classroom management techniques?

I have a questioning and answering style to teaching which helps with classroom management. Instead of telling the students the information I guide them to discovering the answers. They never know when I might call on them to answer which promotes on-task behaviors. Clear behavior expectations and follow through is the most important aspect of classroom management. If the students know what the expectation is and the teacher is consistent, classroom management is a breeze!

What are some of your favorite works for orchestra?

I have some true and blue favorite pieces to teach: Grade 4- Serenade for Strings by Norman Leyden. It has four movements of beautiful music that teaches the orchestra everything they need to know. Grade 5- Capriol Suite. Five movements of awesome music that teaches so many styles. Grade 6- ANY complete Corelli or Handel Concerto Grosso. The Concerto Grosso is where the String Orchestra started and it's so important that the students can experience at least a movement of a Concerto Grosso before they graduate.

What advice do you have for teachers who often worry about LGPE or other performance assessments? While LGPE is an important evaluation, it does not define you or your students. It's just a snapshot of what you and your students do. A quality performance at LGPE is so much more important than the Grade Level you are performing at. I have been guilty of over-programming, we all have. My best memories of LGPE were when my students performed a piece so beautifully because they were confident and not stretched to the limit.

What are some ways being a youth orchestra conductor has changed your perspectives and work in music education? I have cherished my time with The Youth Orchestra of Greater Columbus for over 20 years and am fortunate to be able to continue as The Music Director in retirement. Youth Orchestra is a place where students find students from other schools who are also extremely passionate about making music. It provides the more serious student an opportunity to achieve a high standard of music making. In turn those students are great models for their school orchestra program as well. A Youth Orchestra cannot exist without the wonderful work of the School Orchestra teachers.

Do you have a favorite musical experience or memory to share?

My favorite Musical Memory was when I took Allatoona High School to Washington DC in 2018. We had a very special master class with the Concert Master and Principal Cellist from The Baltimore Symphony. The students played so well and learned so much from the Artists. They watched them perform that evening. The next day, we played an American Music Concert on the Steps of The Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. The students had the freedom to play whatever we wanted and they played SO beautifully. Many tears were shed and many of the students reflected on how inspired they were by the Master class the previous day. They got it....so did I.

Any musical influences that you would like to recognize here? Please tell us about them.

I have been fortunate to be musically nurtured by Giants. Mark Thielen, my High School Orchestra Director, taught me how to have high personal standards. John Whitney, my dear friend and Conducting Mentor taught me how to understand the musical passion inside and express that to others. Bob Phillips taught me how to impact the lives of so many through my teaching and my composing. Finally, videos, writings and interviews of Leonard Bernstein have inspired me to be a better musician, better conductor and most importantly, a better teacher.