

# SABO

S C H O O L E D A M U S T R A



## Carl Sabatino & Peter Sciaino

Whippany Park High School



*The More, The Merrier*

**Survey:** Technology

**Staff Selections:** Concert Band

# UpClose: Carl Sabatino & Peter Sciaino

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# The More, the Merrier

## The Pride of Hanover Township

By Eliahu Sussman

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Carl Sabatino and Peter Sciaino are the co-directors of the band program at Whippany Park High School, a small school in Whippany, N.J. Through meticulous design and unflagging enthusiasm, the two have built a marching band, “The Pride of Hanover Township,” that now boasts a whopping 25 percent of the student body. Their recruitment efforts have been fueled by the dual goal of providing students the same musical opportunities that larger schools might present and simply making the music program as accessible to as many students as possible.

In this recent SBO interview, Carl and Peter elaborate on the methodology and approach they’ve used to build a bigger, more successful band.



**School Band & Orchestra: Hi Carl and Peter. Would you give a quick synopsis of how each of you ended up in music education?**

**Carl Sabatino:** I have been teaching here at Whippany Park High school since 1989. Music was something that I loved as a kid. I wasn't particularly good at it, but I had a band director in high school who was very inspiring. I consider myself lucky, because I guess it worked out. I'm not sure I had any business going in this direction – when I look at the kids now, a lot of them are way better players than I was when I was in high school. I worked really hard in college, though, and music is something I'm really passionate about.

**Peter Sciaino:** My turn? Well, I've always been great – just kidding! I went to Syracuse for my undergrad and NYU for my masters, and came to Whippany Park after I graduated. Carl had already been here for 8 years at that point. I started college as an English major – I thought I was going to be a writer. But at the same time, I played in the jazz ensemble and the marching band, and took trumpet lessons. At some point I realized that that was the direction I wanted to go in, because that's what I was really interested in. I think I was interested in it all along, but was sheepish about fully embracing it. I also questioned whether I was really on the level that I should be to go into music. My parents were

both educators, so it felt like the right choice when I finally made it.

**SBO: Let's talk about the WPHS music program. Carl, what was it like when you came on board in 1989?**

**CS:** When I came on here at Whippany Park High School, I was just a kid right out of college. There were 55 students in the band program and it was serving the needs of the kids, even though the overall enrollment was a bit low. I was part-time between several schools at first, and by the time Pete came on board, we'd built it up to about 70 kids. We had a marching band – it was pretty small, but it was a band. We had one concert band, and a jazz band as well, but it wasn't until Peter

was hired that we really started to build the program up.

**SBO: Did the two of you look around decide that you needed more kids in the classroom? What were your goals coming in?**

**PS:** Band directors are always looking to grow their programs and reach more kids if they're doing their job. I don't know that we were more mind-



Sciaino and Sabatino.



## WPHS Bands at a Glance

**Location:** 165 Whippany Road, Whippany, N.J.

**On the web:** [www.wpmb.org](http://www.wpmb.org)

**Students in school:** 630

**Students in instrumental music program:** 148

**Instrumental music directors:** Carl Sabatino & Peter Sciaino

**2010-11 Ensembles & number of students in each:**

“The Pride of Whippany Park” Marching Band: 148

Symphonic Band: 130

Concert Band: 81

Wind Ensemble: 49

Color Guard: 20 students

Jazz Experience I: 23

Jazz Experience II: 23

**Recent notable events**

2009 Yamaha Cup Group – 5A Best Color Guard

2010 NJ Music Educators Association Marching Band Festival – Gold Rating

2010 USSBA Scotch Plains-Fanwood High School Show – Group 6A 1st Place, Best Music, Best Percussion

2010 Yamaha Cup Group 6A – 2nd Place at New Meadowlands Stadium

May 2011 – To Perform at US Capitol Building in Washington D.C.

### On Deck:

**Music for upcoming WPHS concerts**

Wind Ensemble: Variations on a Korean Folk Song” by John Barnes Chance (*B & H*)

“Arabian Dances” by Brian Balmages (*FJH Music*)

Concert Band: “Days of Glory” by Sean O’Loughlin (*Carl Fischer*)

“Kitty Hawk, 1903” by William Owens (*FJH Music*)

Jazz Experience I: “Sky Dive” by Freddie Hubbard, arr. Erik Morales (*Alfred Publishing*)

“Li’l Darlin’” by Neal Hefti (*Alfred Publishing*)

Jazz Experience II: “Four” by Miles Davis, arr. John Berry (*Prestige*)

“Moondance” by Van Morrison, arr. Victor Lopez (*Belwin*)

ful about recruiting early on; it's more that we had some success because we were excited about what we were doing. We worked well together and the kids responded to that. We were enthusiastic about the new marching band show that year, and so were they. They can sense if you're into it, and they respond to that. It started to get to a point where we had about 500 kids in the school and we were getting almost a fifth of the kids in the school to participate in the band program. Then we started making goals – last year our goal was to get 140 kids on the field in the marching band, and we went over that.

We've always recruited but in the last five years we taken a multi-tiered approach and started adding on to how we recruit.

**CS:** We started taking it much more seriously.

**SBO: What do you think increasing the number of students in the music program means to the kids, the school, and the community?**

**PS:** When you have a small school like we do, you have the potential for putting the kids at a disadvantage because they can be spread so thin. You have to be mindful of the school's en-



vironment. If we were at a school that had 3,000 kids, we probably would do things differently. At a small school, the concept of getting more kids involved with music really means that you have to be super flexible. I know that I was having a lot more fun in a marching band with 200 kids than when I was in a band with 30 kids. It's great to have a full concert band without missing parts or instrumentation. In a small school, it's easy to have that smaller program. So the vision is to give these kids that come from a

smaller town and a smaller community something that is on the same playing field as the programs at some of the larger schools. And music certainly an area where we can make that happen.

**CS:** It was a conscious decision of ours over the past few years to grow the numbers, and to go after a different population of the kids. We opened up the band to beginners and anyone else looking for what we can provide, which is the sense of community and belonging, being a part of something great. We found that just going after the kids that are sitting in eighth grade holding an instrument was a little bit short sighted. There are a lot of other kids that want to be a part of what we're doing. So we made a conscious effort to expand the music program. We felt that it would make us more successful to have more people involved.

**SBO: How has this recent boost in numbers changed your program?**

**CS:** This year was our first year where we really jumped. We had maybe 150 kids marching, and last year we had about 110. And particularly, having that many freshman and sophomores was very challenging from a day-to-day standpoint, so that made us work a lot harder. Having that many different levels of playing is challenging. But we are fortunate that we have a supportive administration and we have a good infrastructure. We see the kids for a weekly lesson, one-on-one,

so we can cater our instruction to the needs of the kids, depending on whatever they need. We're certainly looking to improve upon that, but it's a challenge.

**PS:** Also just as far as the logistics, when 25 percent of the kids come through our door, and those kids are also involved in field hockey, volleyball, cheerleading, and football, we find that we have to have policies clearly set for attendance for those after school rehearsals.

Our band is fortunate to meet every day for a period, so we have contact with all of the kids everyday, which is great. We wouldn't want that to change.

**SBO: And is the marching band, "The Pride of Hanover Township," curricular?**

**PS:** It is part of the curriculum, but it also meets after school twice a week during marching band season. That's where it gets challenging. We're meet-



ing after school, and so are the sports teams. We find that as long as we have a policy and we're reasonable with the kids as far as our expectations, they

usually respond to that in terms of their attendance. Nobody is trying to get out of our rehearsals, and that's a great feeling. That means we're doing some-

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thing right. The general philosophy of the school is that kids should be involved in as much as possible, and we work to keep up our side of that program as much as we can.

**SBO: How do you balance the schedule between your rehearsals and other activities?**

**PS:** That's the hardest part. We have rehearsals twice a week after school, and the students that play sports have practice every day. They know when they sign up for band that we have a clearly defined commitment policy – it's a signed contract – so it's going to be extra work for them. They are aware that they will at least have to split the time if we have a rehearsal when they have a practice. So if a volleyball practice overlaps with band practice for an hour, they'll split that overlap down the middle and do a half an hour of each. The coaches are usually good about it, too. They know that we've been here a long time and we're reasonable. A game trumps a rehearsal, and concert trumps a practice. It's not perfect, but it works.

**SBO: So you hash out the priorities with the coaches in advance?**

**PS:** Carl has always said this and I'm right on board: you never want to put the kids in the middle of these types of situations. You always want to make sure to talk to the coach – if, say, we have a big performance and they have a big game and the kids are working their butts off to try to be in both places at once – to come up with the best situation for the kids.



Obviously, we always think that our performances are super important and the coaches always think what they're doing is more important, but there are times when we've given in because we don't want to put the kid in the middle of it. We've taken the hit sometimes. Of course, we could say, "Too bad, you can't do both," but then we wouldn't have the number of kids that we do have involved in music.

**CS:** We're trying to really go way out of our way to make a kid not have to make a choice between a sport and



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down. Sometimes we see them come running from their practice still in their uniforms, and we see them go to games with their baritones in their hands. They do everything they can because they see that we're really trying hard to accommodate them. They realize that and they appreciate it.

**PS:** And it wasn't always like that. As we got better at this, and the band got better, and the band became more of a cool thing to do, it was an easier

*"We have the entire eighth grade in a little gym and then – boom! – 140 high school kids come running in holding their instruments in their hands. That's pretty impressive for an eighth-grader."*

our activity. We never want to put a kid in that position, even if it means that a kid is not out there for every practice or if he or she misses the occasional performance. And the kids are great – they don't want to let us

sell, the kids were more willing to go the extra mile. In some cases, they're working way harder than we are: they just ran four miles for cross country and then they show up for our prac-

tice and we're marching them around the field for 35 sets in a rehearsal. And then they go home and do their homework!

**SBO: What is it about your program that has inspired your students to want to take on that type of workload?**

**PS:** Like any music program, we try to really foster a sense of community. It sounds cliché to say the word "family," but the social aspect of the band means a lot to the students. In terms of the music we choose and the style we tend to march in, we think we're pretty unique because we are community oriented. We try to reach the kids with music that is important for them to know about, learn from, and get better at their instruments through. But we're also choosing pretty entertaining music that will draw a large reaction from the crowd.

**SBO: You mean pop material?**

**PS:** Absolutely. And we have had shows where, to make that work, we

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also incorporate electronics, guitars, bass guitars, and drum sets to hold up the musicality of the original tunes. We also have pushed more towards a college band feel on the marching field. We have a pre-game show that we do now that we just started this past year. That was a huge hit. It was more of a “rah rah,” school-spirit-and-fight-songs type of performance. The kids love that, because it gives them a chance to really get into it on the field and almost go crazy – in an organized way, of course – and it also gets great reaction from the crowd. The band really thrives off of that reaction. It’s not something just for highbrow music lovers, obviously, but it reaches the energy of all of the people who are there for the football game. The band feeds off of that energy.

There’s a time for the concert band material and other more sophisticated music, but we don’t necessarily go for that during the football games. We will often write or try to find arrangements of current songs that the kids know because not only do the kids in the band think that that’s cool, so do the other students who are their for other reasons, and that encourages some of them to come out and join the band. You have to take advantage of the performances; we play to an audience to a point, while still trying to maintain the educational values of the music and our program.

**SBO: Do you think that there’s an optimal percentage of any school that should participate in the music program?**

**PS:** Sure, 100 percent! That’s the optimal, absolutely. We obviously value what we do to the point where we’ve devoted our lives to it. It’s certainly something that I would hate to not be a part of.

**CS:** The kids that are here definitely get a lot out of our program. They appreciate it. We feel that we can offer something to everybody. No matter how experienced a child is musically, even for students who have never touched an instrument before, we would love to bring them in and teach them what our band program – and learning music – is all about.

**PS:** That attitude is why we attract so many beginners, I think.

**SBO: Is there anything unique that you do in terms of recruiting that other directors and programs might consider?**

**CS:** Every performance is a recruiting tool and we really acknowledge them as such. Take, for example, a Memorial Day parade. Some people might not think about that as much as, say, an

upcoming school concert, but so many more people are going to see the band during the Memorial Day parade than at a school performance. So even just by acknowledging that, we put ourselves in a position to work hard, take it seriously, and put our best foot forward. Who knows how many people will be on that parade route that might want to participate in or support our band?

Another activity we do, which I’m sure many other programs also

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do, is head over to perform for the eighth graders. Again, we really try to pump that performance up and appeal to a broad range of kids. We have the entire eighth grade in a little gym and then – boom! – 140 high school kids come running in holding their instruments in their hands. That’s pretty impressive for an eighth-grader.

Pete mentioned the electronics, so we do a little of that and talk that up. We

also try to sell ourselves as a product and make the kids believe in that. That idea is helped by the fact that a lot of the students coming to the high school may have seen the band come around the corner of Whippany Road during the Memorial Day parade when they were fifth graders, and been impressed by what they saw. And, of course, there are also the football games, which give us great exposure. We don’t do the corps style marching shows – we have so many beginners in our band



“No matter how experienced a child is musically, even for students who have never touched an instrument before, we would love to bring them in and teach them what our band program – and learning music – is all about.”

that it just wouldn’t work. So we made a conscious decision to try to be more entertaining but do it really, really well.

**PS:** Right when kids are signing up for their courses is the hottest time for recruiting; you want to have as much contact with the eighth graders as possible then, because in order to get them to join the band, they need to sign up for band class. Like a lot of high school bands do at this point, we have a website with videos of performances that we try to spread the word about as much as possible. Also, there’s a FAQ portion of the site that has been extremely valuable. We used to field a ton of phone calls when the kids are trying to sign up for courses because that process, and understanding how the music program works, can be overwhelming. That FAQ really helps put the information out there so people understand what’s going on. We also send out a print brochure that our band parents support us with and help pay for. That print brochure has some basic information and some photos, and of course it also has our website printed on it – we’re always trying to get our

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website out there and make that look as cool and interesting and appealing as possible. It's not just a hub for the kids who are already here to get information, but also to attract the kids who aren't already here – as well as their parents.

One other thing we've decided to do is create a brand for the band – a logo, color scheme, and font that present a recognizable and memorable image for the band. Every letter that we send out to kids and parents, they'll know right off the bat it's from us. It sounds kind of silly, but you really are marketing. The words "marketing" and "advertising" sometimes have dirty connotations, as if we're trying to pull the wool over someone's eyes, but we really believe in what we're doing and we're just trying to get it out there to the kids. Once the kids get here, they're having a great experience. You see that Xbox logo, for example, and it doesn't even say "Xbox" anywhere on the ad or the packaging, but everyone knows exactly what it is. So we put our logo and font all over our website and print materials. Even if we hand out a new arrangement that we've done ourselves, we make sure to use our font and throw our logo on there, on occasion. It all helps. And the students like it – they like that consistency and they respond to it. And then when you go around town and see our logo magnet on the back of people's cars, that's certainly helping the promotion as well.

**SBO:** How is that you two have been able to increase the size of your program now, when many music programs around the country are facing budget cuts?

**PS:** We're definitely feeling the pinch, too. We just make ourselves invaluable.

**CS:** We are fortunate to have two band directors at the high school and we understand that that's a rarity among music program. So we try especially hard when we bring the band out to make everyone feel that this is their band. If the senior citizens want us to perform at their holiday celebration, we're there. We're going to show up and put our best foot forward. And at every football game, we want to put on a performance that will have everyone saying, "There's no way we're

going to let anything happen to that band program!"

**PS:** We have about 300 band parents that are currently active, and we have a number of other alumni parents who are still a part of it. We also have all of these alumni band parents and students in town that know about our program. It really means a lot to the community. Like any place, we feel the pinch and we're not getting any increases in

funding, but we make it work. Our administration is really supportive, and part of that comes from the fact that we try not to throw any problems onto their desks. If something comes up that we can handle, we'll handle it in house. Administrators respect that because they then realize that if we come to them with an issue it's going to be something that really requires their attention, not something that's just going to take up their time. They're busy, too.

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**SBO: What is the most important lesson you've learned about being a band director?**

**PS:** Just off the cuff, I'd say that while you have your logos and the kids excited about a trip and the parents involved and whatever else, when it really comes down to it, the kids have to perform music they really believe in and are interested in


playing. That's going to come through in the performance, and also in how the kids approach the activity. You have to pick music that has a broader appeal than just your own tastes. It's not just for highly trained musicians; the music has to be interesting for the students playing it, the students who are listening to it, the parents who are helping you out on a regular basis and have to hear the same thing over and over, and to us, the teachers. It also has to reach those educational

goals of whatever musical elements we're trying to cover in the curriculum. We are really conscious of that and we spend a tremendous amount of time on programming and repertoire.

**CS:** It really comes down to understanding your clientele. With all respect to the programs that are built on a competitive model – and we tried to do that here, at first, too, but it didn't work for us – we had to make a choice. We're a small school and in order to try to be competitive, we'd have to tell a lot of kids that they couldn't participate. We'll take the larger numbers every day of the week. We are trying to be the absolute best we can, but we know that there are other bands out there that are way better than us, musically.

**SBO: So what is it that you hope the students that participate in your program come away with or think back on down the line?**

**PS:** We have a hallway here that we call the "Hall of Fame," where we have a bunch of plaques and photos up. One of the areas there that we're most proud of is a section called "The Next Level." A lot of times people put a lot of stock into which kids are going on to whichever great music schools and how many are going to continue on to be band directors – and that's all great! We've had that, too, and we're certainly proud of them, but that's not the majority of our kids, and it's probably not the majority of any high school music program. But we have a wall where kids sent in photos of them playing in their college marching band or their college pep band or the jazz ensemble in their school. We have a whole wall of that, and that's fantastic. Our current kids who see that realize that this activity isn't a dead end; this is something they can continue doing for the rest of their lives.

**CS:** We have some kids that go to big schools because of a marching band they want to participate in, or a small school that might have a jazz band opportunity for them. That's a great compliment to what we're doing and something we're really proud of. That wall is a testament to what we're doing here. 

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