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Under the direction of Mark Duker, the Waubonsie Valley High School wind ensemble practices for a performance of "Chamak," a Hindustani composition that hits close to home for the many band students of South Asian descent. (*Brian Hill | Staff Photographer*)



Kevin Schmit

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Saniya Desai's flute playing always resonates in her home, but this was different.

A familiarity rang out as her mother crept closer to the bedroom door to listen more closely. The sound, the rhythm and the emotion of the music felt like home.

Waubonsie Valley's wind ensemble is performing a Hindustani musical piece that will be especially personal for the many students of South Asian descent and their families.



Saniya Desai, whose parents were born in India, and the Waubonsie Valley High School wind ensemble practice for a performance of "Chamak," a Hindustani composition. - Brian Hill | Staff Photographer

Written by renowned composer Reena Esmail and commissioned specifically for Waubonsie Valley and a consortium of about 20 schools, the piece is called "Chamak," which translates to "spark" or "sparkle."

Waubonsie Valley band director Mark Duker believes it's the first Hindustani piece written for high school bands featuring wind instruments, a format traditionally reliant on Western influence.

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"We're trying to get really true diversity," Duker said. "As a department, we wanted to make sure we were doing what we could to get our South Asian population represented and seen in the music they're performing."



Waubonsie Valley High School Band Director Mark Duker was inspired by a previous Reena Esmail composition to collaborate with other schools to commission a new piece of Hindustani music from her. - Brian Hill | Staff Photographer

Origins

District 204 is the state's fourth-largest school district and serves portions of Aurora, Bolingbrook, Naperville and Plainfield. In recent years, the population of students of South Asian descent has grown tremendously.

racial demographic in the district.



Because many students in the Waubonsie Valley High School wind ensemble are of South Asian descent, the opportunity to perform the Hindustani composition "Chamak" has been an emotional experience. - Brian Hill | Staff Photographer

Three years ago, Esmail composed a piece performed by the orchestra at Neuqua Valley High School, another District 204 school. Inspired by the impact the performance had on the South Asian families there, Duker knew he had to create a similar experience for the Waubonsie Valley wind ensemble.

Esmail, however, never had composed a piece for a band with a dozen different wind instruments plus percussion parts. Her music, and traditional Hindustani classical music in general, was designed for string orchestras.

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Reena Esmail composed "Chamak," a piece of Hindustani music, specifically for high school bands to perform. - Courtesy of Reena Esmail

"It's closing a loop in my own musical education that I never really had," said Esmail, who studied Hindustani music for two years in India. "I'm so excited. I can't wait to be there and feel the energy of the students.

"They're as much American as they are South Asian," she said. "There's a place they can explore all of that together."

Connections

Esmail, a Los Angeles-based artist, has composed pieces for professional orchestras around the world. She studied at the Yale School of Music and

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As the primary school in the consortium, Waubonsie Valley gets the honor of the premiere performance of "Chamak," a free show scheduled for 7:30 p.m. March 15 at Wentz Hall on North Central College's Naperville campus.

For the next year, members of the consortium -- including fellow District 204 schools Metea Valley and Neuqua Valley, plus Naperville Central, Downers Grove North, Jacobs, Mundelein, New Trier, Wheaton North and schools in Elgin Area School District U-46 -- have the exclusive right to play the piece.



Rishi Mahadevan, whose parents are from India, and the Waubonsie Valley High School wind ensemble practice for a performance of "Chamak," a Hindustani composition. - Brian Hill | Staff Photographer

"With my parents and my family, we can all really connect to this music," said Rishi Mahadevan, a senior clarinet player at Waubonsie Valley whose parents

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Bringing it home

Desai, whose parents are also from India, is torn between wanting to surprise her friends and family with "Chamak" and shouting about it from the rooftops.

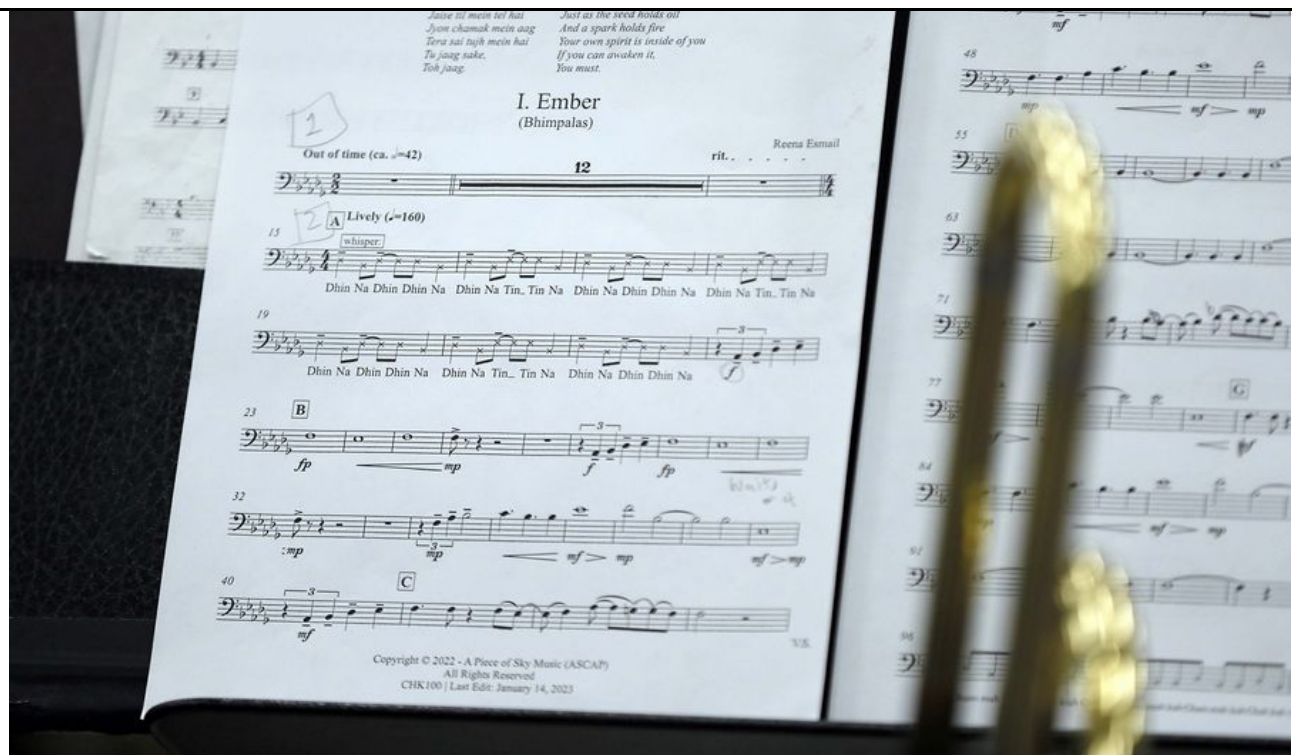
As Desai speaks about the impact of performing a Hindustani piece written by a woman of South Asian descent, she beams.

"I really hope the exploration of this music continues and the diversity of India continues to be explored," Desai said. "I'm going to feel a lot of pride with my family out there."

"Chamak" is designed in three sections, Esmail said, with each section exploring different elements of Indian classical music. There are ragas, or melodic structures, then whispered chants and varied use of Indian musical instruments.

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"Chamak" is a Reena Esmail composition of Hindustani music that will be performed by the Waubonsie Valley High School wind ensemble. - Brian Hill | Staff Photographer

Duker has been the band director at Waubonsie Valley for 10 years, but he considers this performance an absolute highlight. That's saying quite a bit for a program that's been named a Grammy Signature School and performed multiple times at the Midwest Band Clinic and Illinois Superstate Band Festival.

Duker said the opportunity to reach an underserved portion of the South Asian community is just as much of an honor.

"I think everyone in the group understands the significance of trying to open a door that really hasn't been opened yet," he said.

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