

Music Makers bring sweet visions to Louisville classrooms

Making Music helps orchestrate interest

By Andrew Adler • aadler@courier-journal.com • February 14, 2010

If you strolled through the main entrance of Mill Creek Elementary School early one recent Wednesday, you'd have discovered a curious thing:

Instead of blaring the usual cheerless bureaucratic announcements, the loudspeakers were playing soft classical music. Mozart, perhaps, or maybe Haydn.

This was nothing new for Mill Creek, which occupies a cluster of buildings off the southern end of Poplar Level Road. But it was doubly significant on this particular morning. The visitors this day included four musicians from the Louisville Orchestra, who'd be guiding several dozen fourth- and fifth-graders through the wonders of classical repertoire.

Welcome to another edition of Making Music.

For more than half a century, the program has introduced students at Jefferson County Public Schools to the ensemble via classroom visits, followed a few days later by live concerts by the full orchestra. From the days of founding conductor Robert Whitney to the present artistic regime of Jorge Mester, Making Music has been fundamental to the orchestra's identity and purpose.

Similar programs are in place in many cities. Indeed, more than a few professional instrumentalists can trace their initial interest to that connection.

"I grew up with Making Music with the Cleveland

Orchestra," recalls Donald Gottlieb, piccolo player for the Louisville Orchestra. "It's probably one of the reasons why I do what I do today."

Gottlieb was speaking in Mill Creek's gymnasium, where three of his colleagues — cellist Deborah Caruso, violist Jack Griffin and clarinetist Andrea Levine — were warming up on their respective instruments. Soon afterward, each would visit a nearby classroom to play, talk and answer questions. It was a special day, and the kids were psyched.

"There is curiosity no end," said Anastassi Fafalios, Mill Creek's music teacher and an avid bass trombonist. "They love to see and hear live music. It fascinates them, the differences between instruments."

A few minutes later, Levine was holding forth in front of teacher Janie Seng's fifth-grade class. First came some basics: "The clarinet has a single reed," explained Levine, who has been the orchestra's principal clarinetist for seven years. "That's very important, because without the reed, nothing. The clarinet is worthless."

She played a quick scale passage, the notes cascading upward from creamy lows to sizzling highs. Then, a bit of context.

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"On our program today is connecting the skills that you use in reading," Levine said, "to the skills you use in **listening to music**. I want to ask you to close your eyes, and I'll play something. I want you to listen to it, to really try to make it into your mind. There are no right or wrong pictures. You tell me what you see. Close your eyes — no peeking!"

Pulling rabbit out

The children dutifully responded, screwing their eyes shut while Levine played a jaunty melody with lots of short notes. "All right, all done. Open your eyes. Now, what brave volunteers could tell me what picture did you see in your head when you listened to that?"

One student said that the short notes suggested a rabbit running. Levine took that suggestion and ran with it a little herself. "Fast short notes — you said you saw a rabbit — little footsteps. What you said was *visualization*."

She threw out a few more questions: "Who **listens to music** when you are doing your homework? Who listens to music when you are watching a movie or TV?" She flashed a smile. "Who listens to music when your parents are yelling at you?"

A lot can be communicated with a sound or two, Levine emphasized. "There's so much music can do in just a couple of notes to tell a story," she told her students. "You might be a little too young, but tell me if you recognize this. ..."
Raising her clarinet, she played the *da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM* theme from the movie "Jaws."

The kids shouted out the answer. "Yes, you can yell out — the shark!" Levine said. "Just two notes a half-step apart can make you visualize something really scary."

From director Stephen Spielberg the conversation moved to Sergei Rachmaninoff, and how a

composer who writes music is like an author who writes a book. Levine asked her students to "make some predictions" about whether a "love song" by Rachmaninoff (a snippet from the *adagio* movement of his Symphony No. 2) would have fast or slow notes. "Slow; very good."

Turning to Mozart, Levine explained what a "concerto" meant, and how the composer favored her instrument. "He had a lot of fun with the clarinet," she said. "When the clarinet was discovered at the end of the 18th century, he was like a kid in a candy shop. There were so many new things that it could do, but other instruments couldn't do."

'Play everything'

With five minutes to go, it was time to answer some questions. One girl asked Levine "what songs" she preferred.

"I'm kind of the sentimental type, so I really like that stuff," Levine said. "But part of my job in the orchestra is that I have to be able to play everything. There are some songs I don't like as much, but it's my job to make it seem like every one is my favorite."

"How many keys are on the clarinet?" another

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student wondered. "I'm so busy playing, yet I've never really counted," Levine admitted, doing a quick on-the-spot survey and concluding that there are "16 or 17," all silver.

More hands went up. "Yes, you in the purple," Levine said, listening as she was asked if she ever was unhappy playing her instrument.

"There are times that the clarinet, like everything you work really, really hard at, is frustrating," she acknowledged. "But I can't imagine my life without playing music. So sometimes when I think, what it would be like if I became a lawyer or a doctor — this is who I am."

Efficient work

Seng, a 30-year teacher, remarked afterward that she'd witnessed many such Making Music sessions.

"I think it's an excellent program," she said. "I've heard research that says music can help kids actually work more efficiently. I've had bad experiences with my own son. (He) was having some difficulties with math, and he just started playing an instrument in middle school — clarinet, as a matter of fact — and it was amazing. All of a sudden, things just fell into place for him."

In her Mill Creek classroom, Seng said she has observed how her students respond to classical melodies. "They know that music can create a different environment," she said. "In my class, a lot of kids will say if they're getting noisy: 'Mrs. Seng, you didn't turn on the be-good music.' It's a calming influence on them."

Calming, but also sometimes energizing. Teresa Mitchell, an 11-year-old fifth-grader who heard Caruso's cello demonstration, emerged duly impressed. "I think it sounded passionate and sneaky, like 'Tom and Jerry,'" she offered. "It's very neat."

Full performance

A week later, the Mill Creek students, dressed in their best Convocation Day uniforms, dodged raindrops as they scooted inside the Brown Theatre to hear the full orchestra perform. There was plenty of back and forth from the kids in the seats to their new friends on stage. "We're feeling great and ready for great concert," Fafalios declared.

The house lights dimmed. Out came Jason Weinberger, the orchestra's resident conductor and Making Music podium guru. "Good morning!" he said. "*GOOD MORNING!*" thundered a theater full of children from various schools across the city.

"We'll be talking about some of the concepts we use when reading stories," Weinberger explained, "which are the same strategies we use when we are listening to music."

He talked about making predictions, leading into an extended segment where a colleague narrated an American Indian story "about a hairy, crusty, huge, mean beast."

The idea was to hear the story, and then try to predict how it would end. There were a couple of

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unexpected twists. "I'll bet a lot of you were really surprised at what happened," Weinberger said. "Even when we use what we know to predict maybe a happy ending, you still may not know all the details."

'Camptown Races'

From there Weinberger and the orchestra moved on to Stephen Foster and "a story that kind of has to do with where we are from. Stephen Foster wrote another song (that) tells a story about something that happens in Louisville every year. It's a really, really big event. It happens in the spring. Can anyone tell me what it is?"

The Brown erupted. Weinberger grinned. "Exactly! The Kentucky Derby. Except Stephen Foster used a different word. He called it the Camptown Races. Before we sing it together ... let's listen once to the orchestra and see what it sounds like."

Principal trumpeter Jerry Amend tossed off "Call to the Post," and the orchestra launched into one of the best-known tunes in all of American popular song. More visualization. "That's a great example of some of the strategies we use when reading," Weinberger said.

Foster and "Camptown Races" segued into Aaron Copland and "Billy the Kid." "We are going to play two seasons from that story," Weinberger said of Copland's celebrated ballet score. "And we're going to visualize what does seem to sound like. The first thing is, how does the prairie sound?"

A hand went up from the audience. "Kind of a sad feeling — exactly, forlorn," Weinberger agreed. "What kind of feelings do you get when you hear the music? It's very calm — excellent. The music has very soft dynamics. Who can tell you what dynamics are? So with a very soft dynamic we feel very calm and quiet, even a little bit sad. We have so few instruments playing. Just cellos, the violins and flutes. It gives us a feeling of emptiness."

The quiet of the prairie gave way to the raucousness of the rodeo. "Now we're going to ask you to predict what could happen with the orchestra. It's going to get louder? What about the instruments? How will Copland do that in his music? Let's see if your prediction is a good one."

Before long, an hour had passed, and the concert drew to a close. "You guys have been really wonderful listeners today," Weinberger said. "Give yourselves a big round of applause."

He sent the kids out with a final detonation from the orchestra.

"This is the overture from (Glinka's opera) 'Ruslan and Lyudmila,'" Weinberger said, "but the story is yours."

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