

COMMENTARY

‘Kids Compose!’ program magically brings student melodies to life

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It's not every day that an elementary student has the honor of hearing a melody she wrote performed by an ensemble from one of the top music schools in the nation.

But this is Bloomington, and magical things happen here, magical things such as the “Kids Compose!” program that allowed my daughter to experience this honor last week.

Kids Compose! was started here in Bloomington in 2006 by Debbi Ponella and Ruth Boshkoff, and it is a wonderful example of the university reaching out to the community in the name of music education.

Here is how it works. In the fall, elementary school children from grades two through six are invited to submit original melodies for consideration. In my daughter's case, she collaborated with two classmates to compose a melody on the xylophone during music class. Her music teacher, Maggie Olivo, provided support and assisted the girls with notating the melody on the page.

The winning melodies were selected and given to talented IU Jacobs School of Music composition students to arrange into fully-scored compositions. My daughter's melody was woven into an arrangement by Max Grafe, and performed by the Indiana University Concert Band, under the direction of Paul Popiel.

This concert was last Wednesday at the Musical Arts Center for an audience of MCCSC second graders. When announcer Sally Nicholson asked how many audience members were visiting the MAC for the very first time, many small hands shot into the air. I enjoyed watching smiles appear on the faces of band members as they entered the stage and looked out at their young audience. Throughout the concert, the audience members squirmed and moved in their seats but remained quiet and attentive to the performance. I was impressed at the efforts of students and teachers to maintain a respectful atmosphere for the hour-long performance.

My daughter and her good friend/musical collaborator sat patiently in anticipation of hearing their melody. After an excellent performance of symphonic repertoire, the Kids Compose! portion began. The winning composers were invited to the stage to meet their arrangers and hear how they adapted their melody into a full piece.

After the composition students briefly described the creative process behind their arrangements, the melodies for each piece were played in their original form by a solo instrumentalist. Then the full ensemble played the piece as arranged by the composition student. It was fun for my daughter to hear her melody played on the tuba, then jazzed up for the band arrangement.

I'm not sure if the significance of this experience has fully sunk in with my daughter yet. It's easy to forget that we have a world-class music school in our back yard. I can't count how many times my husband and I, both products of public school music programs, and in my husband's case, a Jacobs School graduate, have sworn to attend more musical events at IU, so many of which are free.

But it is nice to know programs such as Kids Compose! exist and have managed to escape the budget cuts that are plaguing arts education. Special thanks go out to all involved in this program: Dean Gwyn Richards from the Jacobs School of Music; Ruth Boshkoff and Debbi Ponella, program coordinators; Max Grafe, IU composition student; Paul Popiel and the IU Concert Band; and Maggie Olivo, music teacher at University Elementary school.

Kim Evans is a Bloomington native and IU graduate who moved back to Bloomington in 2005 to open her graphic design studio, raise her family and circle back to her writing. She can be reached at kimevans_columnist@att.net.