

Kids Compose helps students compose their own music

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Guest columnist

Given leeway, kids will pick a chord that sounds scary when they think about making music. Especially when they know it's going to be heard by their peers at Halloween time.

When Debbi Ponella, director and co-founder of Kids Compose, got the chance to work with three second-grade classes at Bloomington's Clear Creek Elementary School, she waded, no, jumped in.

"I could speak all day about my passion for creativity — cultivating (it) in students, teachers, myself," she said over the phone.

Ponella has a master's degree in cre-

ativity and innovation; watching second-graders think up song ideas is her kind of thing. She's particularly interested, because as she began attending creativity conferences, she noticed they seemed to omit music. Bridging music and creativity became her goal. In fact, she hosts a podcast about it, "Defining Creativity."

Second-graders haven't yet formally learned to read music, so Ponella and Clear Creek teacher Bridget Rinehimer called on their own creative personalities. Yes, they told the kids about register and dynamics, but they also challenged them to match foods with rhythms. People say don't go to the grocery on an empty stomach, but in this case those growling stomachs worked.

The kids in the first of the three class happened to be hungry, so they talked about food. Their song became "Food of the World Melody Written by Hungry Students."

Children would approach the class whiteboard and pick out musical notes the adults had drawn. Using techniques such as these, each class writes one melody. It goes to a college student — often one pursuing a music education degree — at Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music, who finishes and plays the piece.

"You could watch the kids' personalities showing up in different ways," Ponella said.

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Instructors and students at Clear Creek Elementary School play music together. COURTESY PHOTO PROVIDED BY KIDS COMPOSE

tage-style jewelry. Her upcoming album

And she's already got her date picked

Pearce, meanwhile, has been reflect-

Kids

IU's Center for Rural Engagement is supporting the project, the pilot of which is this Clear Creek event. On Oct. 27, local children will gather at Clear Creek (this pilot program is not open to the public) to hear the finished compositions and hopefully be inspired to start composing, themselves.

"We're starting here and expanding all over," Ponella said, referring to the project's potential breadth. We are

bringing in musicians, and Sylvia McNair is narrating. This is for town and gown."

Musical notation is new to kids at the second-grade level, so they created their melody by telling a story. It is set in October, and they picked G minor instead of G major because they thought the minor chord sounded spookier. First, came the setting, a wind-torn Halloween night.

"The melody/story starts with the wind swirling around and repeating." This allowed the adults to teach about

the repeat sign. They used the two syllables in the word gargoyles, plus rests, to represent a frozen statue.

"The gargoyle comes to life and jumps into a swimming pool with a splash and sinks to the bottom. It will be interesting to see what the Jacobs composition student does with (these melodies)," Ponella said.

Kids Compose began in 2006 in Bloomington, a project of Ponella and Ruth Boshkoff with help from the Jacobs School's composition department. Its hopes are to encourage children's

natural composition ability and is sponsored by the Jacobs School, with funding from the Bloomington Community Arts Commission and the Community Chamber Music Association.

"Through highly interactive creative activity, (Kids Compose) brings together school kids and Jacobs School of Music students. Debbi is also huge fun!" said Alain Barker, faculty affiliate of the IU Center for Rural Engagement and director, Music Entrepreneurship and Career Development.