

The Naked Truth

Amici unleashes flood of creativity

One day in September 2009, Amy Goesser Kolb, who plays oboe in the classical music ensemble Chamber Music Amici, brought a CD to violinist Sharon Schuman. Schuman loved the delightful musical version of “The Emperor’s New Clothes” by contemporary American composer Peter Schickele, and thought the group should play it.

But the musical retelling of Hans Christian Andersen’s perennial cried out to be staged for kids rather than in a typical chamber music concert. Also, Schickele’s characteristically idiosyncratic version (a fine composer, he’s best known for his PDQ Bach spoofs) veered from the familiar fairy tale, so, Schuman thought, what they should do is have someone read the brief original story prior to the performance. But might that be a little stodgy for an audience full of kids? Why not present it theatrically? She imagined Eugene’s most popular musical theater actor, Bill Hulings, in the role of Andersen, telling the story.

Actually, Schuman mused, if we really want to entertain the kids, why not make a full on-stage extravaganza, with dancers enacting the story along with the music and narration? Schuman called the Eugene Ballet, whose executive director, Riley Grannan, had once created a production called *Children of the Raven*, which also had a classroom curriculum introducing kids to dance. They could do the same for the Emperor.

Chamber Music Amici applied for, and eventually received, \$10,000 in grants to fund what was evolving into a major multimedia educational project. But it seemed a shame to restrict the performance to kids in schools — Schuman resolved to put on public performances as well.

“That’s when I felt a sense of panic creeping in,” Schuman recalls with a chuckle. Somehow, a half hour piece of music and narration had morphed into a much bigger project than this small chamber music group had ever imagined.

But they pulled it off. Last month, 600 Springfield students began a five-week curriculum in language arts, social studies and the arts revolving around “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” Wednesday, June 1, they trooped to Springfield’s Wildish Theater to see Hulings, Eugene singer/actor Sandy Naishtat (as narrator), a quintet of dancers, and five Amici musicians present the story in two free performances. Saturday, June 4, everyone else can see it. But the bigger story happened offstage.

Collaborative Vision

The Emperor’s New Clothes represents a logical extension of the goals Chamber Music Amici set from its inception in January 2009. A resident company of the recently refurbished Wildish Theater, Amici has helped revive downtown arts across the river from Eugene. They’re known for making concerts fun by breaking a few obsolete classical music formulas — keeping programs about an hour long, ditching tedious intermissions, serving desserts at a party onstage after shows.

Amici concerts always involve collaborations with other musicians beyond the core quintet (Schuman, Kolb, Pilar Bradshaw, Victor Steinhardt, Steve Pologe), so the ballet partnership is merely another step in that direction. The show includes new choreography commissioned by Amici and created by Eugene Ballet dancer Ben Goodman. Goodman has dual experience with this production; in high school, he danced in the title role in the Emperor ballet, and he also played Schickele’s good-natured music in the band.

“What’s fun for the performers doing a children’s ballet is that you get to connect with your inner child and ham it up because kids won’t think it’s cheesy,” the 22-year-old Goodman says. For the audience, the tale offers “a lesson you can apply constantly throughout whole life, even more so as an adult than as a kid,” he adds. “You’re going to encounter these people who are going to try scam you, and can’t let yourself be won over by flashy advertising.”

Lifelong Lessons

The lessons of the productions extend to the classroom curriculum that students have been working on twice a week over the past month, with help from music teachers in four Springfield public schools. One of them, Amy Danziger, started off by telling the original story, then making up variations on it. She then asked her Riverbend Elementary School students to do the same.

“They came up with amazing stories,” Danziger recalls, including one in which a vain empress is persuaded that a style featuring rocks, sticks and dirt would be



tres chic. “Now I can’t get them to stop telling me different versions — in outer space, underwater, in a fictional elementary school, using animals,” she says.

Later, Danziger asked students to pantomime the events of the story, and to make up music for the production using instruments in her classroom. “When kids are given tools to create, they’re ready,” she explains. “I can’t stop them. It’s a testament to the fact that everyone is artistic in some way. Given the opportunity, they all want to participate and create things.”

The flood of creativity unleashed by the project gratifies Danziger, who’s also the longtime cellist for one of the city’s most original bands, Mood Area 52. “I grew up in a musical family and went to see a lot of concerts,” she recalls. “A lot of these kids don’t go to the Hult Center and have never been to Wildish Theater. This is a Title I school — high poverty, eighty percent of the students qualify for free or reduced lunches. So it’s important that they see that adults can be passionate about the arts,” she says.

“It’s not coming from a video game,” Danziger continues. “They can see actual people creating in the moment. I want them to understand that they can do things like that when they get older — that they can make art.”

Next year, Amici plans to give six free performances for students in the Wildish Theater, collaborating with classroom teachers and principals from a dozen public schools. “We’re videotaping everything,” Schuman says, and they plan to make a documentary that includes comments about the story from elected and other

leaders. The plan is to put it all, including the curriculum, on a website with links to resources, so that any teacher in the world can use it for free.

The Next Generation

All this fulfills another Amici goal: To promote development of a new generation of chamber music lovers. The group offers discounted youth tickets, performances in area public schools and Springfield’s Emerald Arts Center, partnerships with music teachers including a composition program for high school students at Springfield Academy of Arts and Academics, an art contest, work with the UO’s Community Music Institute and other educational efforts.

It seems to be working; although downtown Springfield hasn’t hitherto won renown as a high culture destination, Schuman says every Amici show has sold out, and that the audience contains a significantly higher percentage of young listeners than your typical chamber concert. “Chamber music, the arts — these things are crucial in our culture,” Schuman insists. “We can’t just stand by and watch them disappear.”

The Emperor program offers artistic opportunity for kids who have as much interest in creative education — regardless of whether they grow up to be artists — as their peers from wealthier families. It’s also a metaphor for a community that prides itself on how much it values children and the arts but, as last month’s defeat of school funding initiatives across Oregon revealed, stands nakedly exposed as having other priorities.

“I used to worry about the arts being cut,” Schuman says. “Now I worry about everything being cut. We’re trying to inspire young people to want to be musicians. All of these children could pick up an instrument tomorrow. A lot of them want to play. The message is, ‘I could do this — you could, too.’” **EW**

“The Emperor’s New Clothes”
Free performances for Springfield students were June 1.
Public performances will be held at 1 and 2:30pm Saturday, June 4, at the Wildish Community Theater, 630 Main St. in Springfield. \$15 general, \$5 students.
541-953-9204 or chambermusicamici.org

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