
Vivaldi sparks students interest in music

By Laurel Nadon



Staff reporter Antonio Vivaldi may have died in 1741, but Grade 5 students at Good Shepherd School in Okotoks are learning about how his impact lives on today.

Ninety students have been learning about Vivaldi for the past three or four months and capped off the chapter with a presentation from ambassador Samantha Whelan Kotkas from the National Arts Centre on Tuesday, April 25.

Music teacher Brian Kommes said that listening to Whelan Kotkas on the trumpet showed students how professional musicians can sound.

It reinforced all the things I've been trying to teach them and it brings music and this person Vivaldi to life, Kommes said. It really introduced them to some instruments. She's a very accomplished musician.

The presentation tied in with the students' study of Vivaldi's most famous work *Four Seasons* with a focus on spring.

His music is very easy to listen to and very imaginative, Kommes said, adding that the students played Vivaldi's music at the last Christmas concert to learn rhythm.

Students have learned about Vivaldi's life, including the fact that he had asthma as a child, but didn't let it prevent him from playing the violin and composing. He was a priest before becoming famous as a composer and was called the *Red Priest* because of his bright red hair.

Vivaldi, who was born in 1678 in Venice, Italy, lived during the baroque period which lasted from 1600 to 1750. Kommes described this as a great age of discovery, when people first learned that the sun was the centre of the solar system and made microscope and disease discoveries.

Kommes noted that Good Shepherd School is the only school in the district which was selected for the presentation, which is designed specifically for schools in rural areas.

The presentation, part of the Music Ambassador Program from Ottawa for Grade 4 to 6 students, is aimed to increase audiences for live performances.

If the kids are turned on to classical music, they'll become more well-rounded as citizens and have a better appreciation for the arts and create a better following for orchestral or classical music, Kommes said.

He added that the presentation should get students thinking about which instrument to study in Grade 6 and also different ways of playing from loud, soft, as a soloist or with a group.

The Music Ambassador Program plans to present to 210 schools in Alberta over the next three years, with three ambassadors in Alberta.

The program follows on the heels of a CD released in 1999 by the National Arts Centre Orchestra called *Vivaldi Four Seasons* featuring music director and solo violinist Pinchas Zukerman.

During the presentation, Whelan Kotkas showed students the B flat trumpet, C trumpet, the piccolo and discussed the different instrument families from woodwinds, percussion, brass and string. Whelan Kotkas, who lives in Calgary and plays with the Red Deer Symphony, said she hopes students came away from the session with a passion for music.

When I saw them pick up their records and play (at the end of the presentation), that meant so much, Whelan Kotkas said. I think at this age they're open to new experiences. One positive experience at this age can change their whole life.

Whelan Kotkas said her life was shaped by such an experience when she was allowed to play the autoharp in Grade 2.

I lived to go to elementary school for music, Whelan Kotkas said.

She laughs when recalling how she chose the trumpet because the decision was based on one fact: it was her band teacher's favourite instrument. What kept her hooked is that the trumpet is a leader instrument and can be used to play jazz, country or classical music.

Her passion for the instrument led her to receive a Masters in Trumpet Performance from the University of Houston and she has now played the trumpet for 24 years.

She suggests that students deciding on an instrument should listen to the instrument and see if they like how it sounds.

You're going to be trying to recreate that sound, Whelan Kotkas said.

